



Native Landscaping

FROM EL PASO TO L.A.

Sally Wasowski with Andy Wasowski
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDY WASOWSKI

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FROM EL PASO TO L.A.

Other Books by the Authors

*Native Texas Plants:
Landscaping Region by Region*

*Native Texas Gardens:
Maximum Beauty, Minimum Upkeep*

Gardening with Native Plants of the South

Requiem for a Lawnmower

The Landscaping Revolution

Gardening with Prairie

For Ron and Maureen Gass.
You guys inspire us in many ways.



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ern California. There I discovered an incredible array of native plants, perfectly adapted to the demands of the climate, and displayed in naturalistic exhibits in the garden. How unfortunate, I said to myself, that these plants seem so unappreciated and underutilized in their own home country. The Wasowskis address this same observation, noting that, especially in southern coastal California, gardeners may have to search out increasingly rare remnants of unaltered land upon which to model their naturalistic garden designs.

It is important, the Wasowskis advise the reader, before planning a dry climate garden, to first observe the unaltered landscapes of nature, where "... instead of straight lines and rows, there is a harmony of textures and colors and a relaxed mingling of elements ... far more complex and satisfying than in a formal landscape design." Each of the seven regions in this book offers gardeners a "wonderfully beautiful habitat worthy of emulation in the garden."

While stressing the inclusion of plant material that is indigenous to a region, the Wasowskis remain open to the incorporation of *non*-native plants in naturalistic gardens. In selecting nonnatives, however, they advise choosing ones with horticultural requirements that match what a site naturally provides in the way of light, soil, and rainfall. They also advise against selecting any nonnatives which might be invasive or threatening to the native flora of the region.

Visual compatibility is yet another concept for gardeners to consider. For example, it is an assault to a region's natural appearance to plant exotic trees that will protrude above the canopy of a region's native trees. Any nonnative trees and shrubs selected should resemble in form and texture those of the natural habitat. In the category of accent plants, one example of an acceptable nonnative for some deserts might be the use of non-invasive fast-growing African aloes to mimic the forms of slower growing agaves that are native to America.

By beginning their book with a discussion of ecological as well as climatic aspects of the regions, the Wasowskis distinguish their approach to landscaping from that of many others. Only after this foundation is laid do the authors address the pragmatic aspects of gardening in dry regions. Their enlightened presentation includes a thorough discussion of the importance of working within a "building envelope" where land is under development. A site plan for an "Envelope Garden" shows the reader how to set a home within an existing landscape to preserve as much of the natural flora of the site as possible. Accompanying this are ideas for revegetating areas disturbed

during construction, as well as plans for enhancing private areas around the house with thematic courtyard gardens such as a "Moonlight Garden," a "Curandera Garden," and a "Hummingbird Garden." The plans are keyed to indigenous charts found at the back of the book, making each plan adjustable to the regional character of any one of the seven zones addressed.

From beginning to end, *Native Landscaping from El Paso to L.A.* celebrates the respect for regionalism that Lady Bird Johnson aspired to resurrect in Americans during her travels across the United States as First Lady. Wherever she went, she encouraged communities to appreciate and conserve the natural character of their own regions. Asking the now celebrated question, "Why can't Texas look like Texas?" she fought a landscaping trend that had been in place since Europeans first settled in America—the trend to replace native flora with exotic plants from other regions and continents. Mrs. Johnson was among the first to point out that such severe manipulation of native landscapes not only destroyed the natural character of each region, it was water-consumptive, maintenance-intensive, and incapable of providing birds and other wildlife with the food and shelter to which they were adapted.

Particularly in the southwestern regions of North America, this destructive approach to landscaping seems at last to be giving way to a more naturalistic, regionally appropriate trend. The Wasowskis deserve much credit for their role in advancing this emerging enthusiasm for regional integrity and sustainability in landscape design. "The best designed native plant gardens," they write, "are a balance between raw nature and human control." Through their admirably well-structured presentation of text, drawings, photographs, and charts, this new edition of *Native Gardens for Dry Climates* will go far in enabling gardeners of the Southwest's driest regions to achieve this balance.

Robert Breunig, Ph.D.

Executive Director of the
Lady Bird Johnson Wildlife Center



Horizons in the desert stretch off forever, and storms, such as this one over Altar Valley near the Sonoran Desert Museum in Tucson, can often be seen many miles away. The scent of creosote makes the air spicy and alive.

PREFACE

It was one of the most gorgeous lawns we'd ever seen. The color was rich and dark, and every blade had been mowed to putting-green perfection. Abutting the house was a crisply trimmed box hedge, flanked by rows of shrubs pruned into little mushroom caps. As we drove by—it was midafternoon in July and the temperature was crowding 100 degrees—the sprinkler system was on, and a steady stream of water was flowing down the driveway and into the street.

This lush, verdant landscape wasn't in Virginia or Connecticut. It was in a southwestern state where the annual rainfall is a small fraction of what those eastern states get. It was in a city where the water department promotes *xeriscaping*, that is, using native and adapted plants that can exist on only the water that nature provides. The plant materials in this landscape were mostly imported varieties, ill suited to this part of the country, and by and large water-guzzlers.

All the areas covered in this book—from deserts to coastal chaparral—have two things in common above all else: 1) a high percentage of residents who came from somewhere else—usually the Midwest or Northeast—and continue to garden much as they did back home, and 2) low annual rainfalls ranging from a pathetic 2 inches per year around Mexicali to 16 inches in Los Angeles. These areas have periodic droughts and even, from time to time, water rationing. In some places water problems include salinity and pollution.

To meet the needs of a growing population—Las Vegas, for example, adds 4,000 people every month—water must be imported from other regions, even other states. As one water department employee told us, "It's a constant scramble to find new and affordable sources."

Interestingly, many Southwest communities pay less for their water than does the rest of the country. While the national average is \$1.67 per 1,000 gallons, Los Angeles residents pay a little over \$1.50 and Las Vegas and Phoenix residents pay about \$1.00. Traditionally, water rates are kept artificially low to encourage people and businesses to move to the Southwest; this also helps foster the illusion that water is not a problem.

But one thing is certain: Rates will rise. The Federal Safe Drinking Water Act means that communities are having to install additional and costly treatment facilities to meet the new purity standards for potable water. Those costs will, of course, be passed on. While



Lush, green lawns—like this one—are ill suited to the dry climate of the Southwest and require wasteful amounts of water.

nationally 40 to 60 percent of household water is poured on landscapes, in the arid Southwest the figure jumps to as high as 80 percent! As the cost of water rises, many residents are rethinking the idea of maintaining lawns and are looking at alternatives.

It's not merely the rising cost of water that should dissuade homeowners from using it so extravagantly on landscapes, however. Consider, too, what all that water actually accomplishes. The overly watered ground becomes a hospitable breeding ground for alien pollen and mold-producing weeds, which of course cause hay fever. Remember that TV commercial years ago that told us to "send your sinuses to Arizona"? That may have been true back in the 1950s, but not today.

THE GRAVEL NIGHTMARE

While back-East-style landscapes are all too common in these parts, there is another style that one sees just as often: a barren caricature of the desert, with a few cacti here and there and lots of gravel. Although it is certainly not extravagant with water, this landscape style goes too far in the opposite direction. When you consider the amount of reflected heat that comes bouncing off that gravel in the summer, you have to wonder if higher air-conditioning costs aren't canceling out the water savings.



Cities like Las Vegas must import water from other regions to meet the needs of growing populations.

THE NATIVE ALTERNATIVE

Scattered throughout Southern California and the Southwest, you *can* find alternative landscapes that use native plant materials superbly suited to their environments. These are not boring rock-and-cacti layouts; they are soft and colorful. Since native plants have been coping with the region's extremes for millennia, they have exactly calibrated themselves to the locale. Once established, they exist quite well on whatever meager sprinkles nature provides. Native landscapes, in addition to being drought-tolerant, are extremely low-maintenance, and environmentally friendly; healthy natives thrive without pesticides. They also provide habitats for many species of wildlife—birds, insects, and mammals—that are a vital part of a well-balanced ecosystem. Yet these creatures are becoming endangered as new roads, housing developments, shopping malls, and business parks are interrupting migratory routes and destroying age-old nesting and feeding sites. Native landscapes are also a feast for the eyes—sometimes delicately pretty, sometimes magnificently beautiful.

They are also, for the time being, rare. But if we succeed in whetting your appetite for native plants with this book, the time may well come when native and natural landscapes will be commonplace.

OLD IDEAS, NEW IDEAS

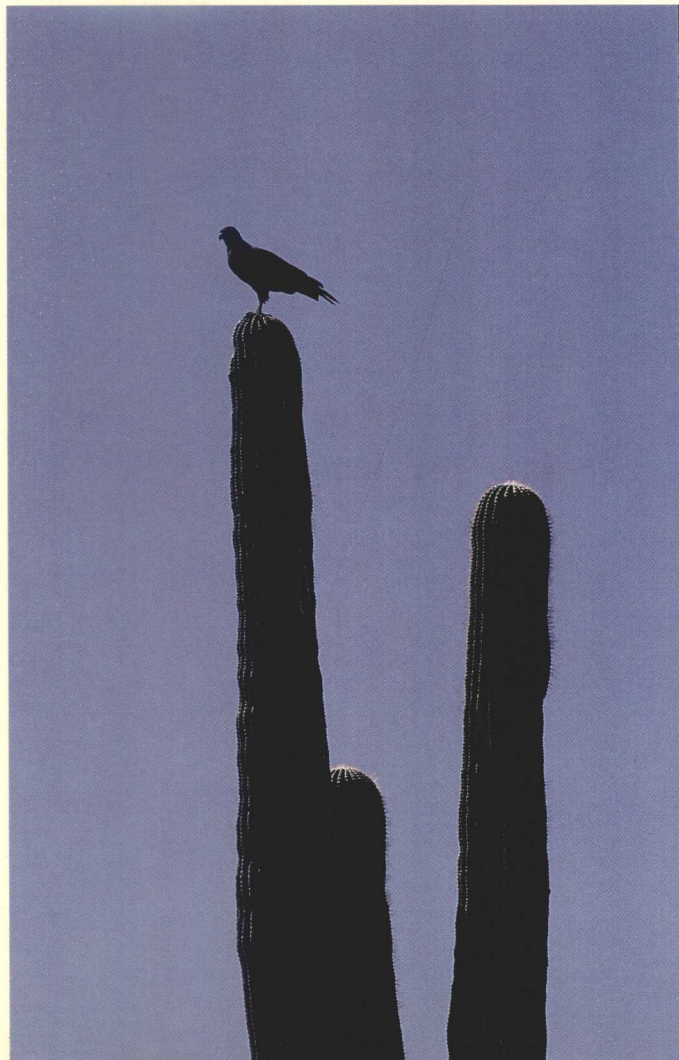
Recently we were looking at old family slides. One slide, from 1965, shows Andy as a tourist in Europe, wearing a suit and tie as if he were going to a business meeting. A vacation slide of me around that same time shows me in white gloves and heels. Today we go on vacation in sneakers, jeans, and T-shirts.

American attitudes have changed about many things: our way of eating now tends toward low-fat, low-cholesterol, more natural foods; we are smoking a good deal less; even our attitudes about the opposite sex are becoming more enlightened. Attitudes about our environment are also changing, and while the majority of us will admit to being overwhelmed by some of the arcane arguments being used by people on both sides of any environmental issue, most of us seem to sense that things are not as good as they used to be, and something must be done.

One thing we can all do is look at our own front and back yards. We may not feel able or qualified to tackle concerns such as acid rain and ozone depletion, but we can certainly tackle concerns close to home. Consider for a second the matter of pesticides. According to the National Coalition Against the Misuse of Pesticides, in Wash-



This gravel landscape requires little water, but does not add much charm to its surroundings.



Native species, like this hawk, at left, and horned lizard, above, thrive in a well-balanced ecosystem.



Australian eucalyptus thrives in California, but creates a fire hazard.

ington, D.C., American homeowners apply four times more pesticides on their landscapes than all the farmers in the country use on their treated acreage. Consider, too, all that household water we use just to keep those conventional landscapes alive.

And lastly, consider just how much time and money is spent each year to maintain those conventional landscapes. Isn't it time we rethought our traditional notions of landscaping? Isn't it time to shed those horticultural three-piece suits and white gloves?

WHAT TO EXPECT

This book is not intended to be the definitive work on the subject; there are thousands of native plants throughout Southern California and the Southwest, and any book that attempted to cover all of them

would not only be too expensive to buy but also too heavy to lift.

For most readers, this book will be a basic primer—an introduction to a brand-new palette of plant materials, as well as a brand-new way of thinking about gardening. For those who are already somewhat familiar with native plants, we hope to offer exciting new possibilities for designers as well as growers.

The native plants in this book were selected only after much research and countless conversations with designers, botanists, growers, and lay gardeners. These natives are the showiest and easiest to buy and/or grow or are so important to the basic regional habitats that it would be quite difficult to garden without them. Many of the plants we omitted are for sale in nurseries and are covered in other identification books, along with photos and descriptions.

Using natives doesn't mean that you have to reject nonnatives out of hand; many naturalized plants and some cultivars are well adapted and will work for you. But a word of caution: Many naturalized plants work too well. Australian eucalyptus, for example, thrives in California, so well that it is taking over and destroying native habitats. Eucalyptus is also trashy, dropping shreds of bark and dead wood around the base of its trunk and creating a very real fire hazard. The rule to follow is: Use what works without endangering the environment. What works best, I believe, is native plants.

I hope this book guides you to the same thrill of discovery I found when I first started using natives.

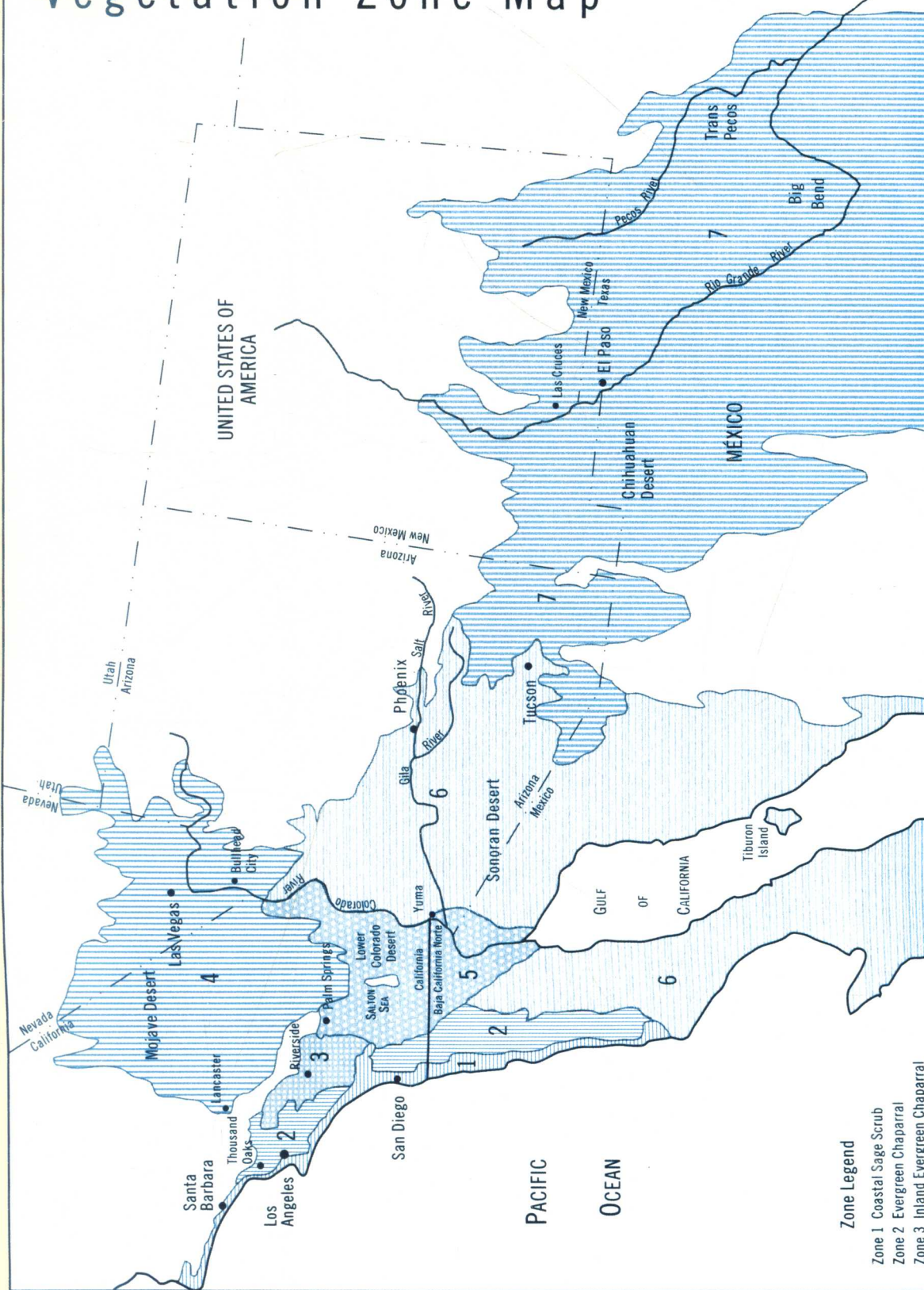
Sally Wasowski

Taos, New Mexico

Vegetation Zone Map



SCALE 1" = 85 MILES



Zone Legend

- Zone 1 Coastal Sage Scrub
- Zone 2 Evergreen Chaparral
- Zone 3 Inland Evergreen Chaparral
- Zone 4 Mojave Desert
- Zone 5 Lower Colorado Desert
- Zone 6 Sonoran Desert
- Zone 7 Chihuahuan Desert

INTRODUC

GARDENING WITH NATIVE PLANTS DOES NOT MEAN ADHERING TO A SINGLE, RIGID WAY

of landscaping. In a formal, traditional garden, one can substitute native plants for more

conventional nursery stock. There is also a naturalistic approach, in

which the gardener may opt for a less controlled, more free-flowing

look. Thirdly, there is the natural habitat garden that relies totally on

indigenous plants and becomes a self-sustaining ecosystem.

FORMAL GARDENS

Most people get into native plants the way they get into cold swimming

pools—very carefully. A gardener goes out and buys a pretty native

plant—but only one—and introduces it into the existing landscape. If that landscape

requires lots of water, the native drowns and the gardener concludes that the native plant

failed. If overwatering isn't a problem, chances are the native will out-thrive the exotics

in the garden. The gardener will be impressed and encouraged, and will buy another one.

It usually takes about three successes such as this to make a true native-plant lover.



In September the focus of color is close to the front door. In pots and in the ground are red-flowered *zauschneria*, pale lavender seaside daisy, and silver-leaved saffron buckwheat (*Eriogonum crocatum*). On either side of the entrance, two Channel Island tree poppies are in flower, though not as lushly as in the spring. And in the far corner, Catalina silverlace raises its yellow heads above lacy silver foliage.

TION



Blue-flowered ceanothus and golden-flowered fremontia 'Pacific Sunset' dominate the Home Demonstration garden at Santa Barbara Botanic Garden in April. The blue grama lawn is softly green, while a coast live oak provides the backdrop. The silvery-foliated hedge is saffron buckwheat (*Eriogonum crocatum*). On the deck are pots of lavender, blue-flowered Cleveland sage and lilac verbenas (*Verbena lilacina*).