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'SCAPING ARIZONA

In the arid parts of this country, there is a recent trend toward more native plants and less forced use of turfgrass. The practice is called 'desert landscaping,' and here's what you should know about it.

"There is a recent trend," says landscape architect Steve Martino, "to want Arizona to look like Arizona."

First in Tucson and now increasingly in the Phoenix area, traditional landscapes of the Midwest and California are losing ground to the look of the native Sonoran Desert. Turf areas are smaller. Desert plants increasingly are in demand. Decomposed granite and brittle bush replace Bermudagrass as ground cover. Mesquite and ironwood replace mulberry and olive trees. Jojoba replaces hibiscus.

Usually referred to as "desert landscaping," it's a challenging new ball game for the green industry in the southwest.

One of the pioneers in using desert plants is Steve Martino & Associates, a Scottsdale-based landscape architecture and planning firm. Martino has specified native desert plants into landscapes for 12 years.

Martino prefers to call it "native plant landscaping." The word "desert" misses the mark, he says.

In this type of landscape, native desert plants and plants from other arid regions of the world like Australia are used to provide the traditional benefits of landscaping: shade, privacy, screening and aesthetics.

"I've tried to show that native plants can be used in landscaping and you gain the benefits without losing anything," Martino says. It

looks natural. It works. And it's catching on.

Desert demand

"Demand this year for desert plants is unbelievable," says nurseryman Mark Mohlenbrock. "It happened in Tucson earlier, but the Phoenix area has really caught on to using low water-use plants this year. More so than ever before."

Mohlenbrock is production manager and research botanist for Greenworld Nursery Products, a wholesale and retail nursery in Phoenix. For several years, he kept small supplies of desert plants he knew would catch on "someday." This year those supplies were exhausted early.

The increasing popularity of desert landscaping is due largely to three factors.

● Water conservation. "People are becoming more aware of water use in the desert," Mohlenbrock says. "Most new developments call for low water-

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use plants. Many of the metro communities here in the Valley have come out with lists of plant material accepted for city jobs and commercial developments. They're not outlawing the heavy water users, but there certainly is a real discouragement against using them. And some are banned because they're allergenic."

● **Aesthetics.** "Desert landscaping has become more accepted for the aesthetics—the open landscape, the filtered light effect from using palo verde trees," Mohlenbrock says. In the desert landscaping around his own home, Mohlenbrock says, he has 50 different species. "I've got all different shapes, all different textures and something that blooms every single month of the year."

● **Low maintenance.** "Desert landscaping or low water-use landscaping requires a lot less maintenance," Mohlenbrock says. Less watering is needed. Most desert plants are not meant to be tightly pruned. "And you don't have to go out and mow your grass every day," he says.

Both Martino and Mohlenbrock are quick to point out that desert landscaping does not mean "no grass." Turf areas may be smaller, but they're used as an accent, as a means of unifying space. Turf particularly is used to establish more lush micro-climates in private courtyards, gardens or patio areas.

Desert aesthetics

Water issues started the trend to desert landscaping. But it's the growing appreciation of the native desert that's making it increasingly popular.

"Most people still want our environment to look like Orange County, California," Martino says. "But people can really get attached to the desert once they're out here, even though they may not think that in the beginning."

In contrast to the view that the desert must be barren, Martino likes to use desert washes or "arroyos" as a model, particularly for garden areas. Because arroyos catch water, plants are larger and more abundant there. Martino likens it to a "weedy English country garden look with native plants."

Landscape designers can use a plant palette of more than 100 species of trees, shrubs, cacti, ground cover, annuals and grasses. For trees, varieties of palo verdes, acacias and mesquite are common. For shrubs, yucca, creosotebush, jojoba and cassias may be used. For accent, cacti such as saguaro, ocotillo, prickly pear or cholla may be used, though availability isn't always assured. Bursage, brittle



Mark Mohlenbrock of Greenworld Nursery Products with a desert plant called a ruellia californica.

bush, verbena and aloe are common ground cover.

One side benefit is, because the native plants offer habitat and tie into the food chain, native creatures reappear. Martino's clients report seeing hummingbirds, coyotes, foxes and javelinas around their homes.

Landscaping challenges

Desert landscaping is not without its challenges. Its maintenance is both an advantage and a problem. While desert plants require less watering, trimming and mowing, some maintenance

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—Mark Mohlenbrock

is required. Owners often don't know what's needed.

"You really do need to learn all over again how to care for it," Mohlenbrock says. "You may go out and water for a few minutes once a week and your trees die. They're used to once or twice a month deep soaking."

Learning to accept desert plants in their natural, free-flowing form is a challenge for some people. With many desert plants, only dead branches should be removed, but some trimmers tend to give the plants a "haircut," as Martino says.

As with other landscapes, annual grass and broadleaf weeds pose a problem in the native plant landscaping. Decomposed granite does little to crowd out weeds. Among the common weed problems are spurge, pigweed, crabgrass and Russian thistle.

The most practical way to control weeds in desert landscaping is with pre-emergence herbicides. "The key material we use is Surflan," says Jeff Eggen of Scottsdale's Eggen Weed Control. "For many jobs, it's the only pre-emergent specified."

Surface-applied as a liquid, Surflan can be sprayed safely around the base of established plants or broadcast over the top. It is labeled for control of 50 different annual grasses and broadleaf weeds and is safe on 175 different ornamental species.

Occasionally, on a first application where weeds are up and growing, Eggen uses a tank mix of Surflan and Roundup. In one application, Roundup controls the emerged weeds and Surflan provides the residual control to keep new weeds from emerging all season.

Education and supply

One of the challenges facing desert landscapers remains public education.

"The concept has caught on," Mohlenbrock says. "Grass is 'out' but what to do next is a question. Education of the general public as to what's available is poor."

The Arizona Nurseryman's Association is working to change that, Mohlenbrock says. Nursery plants will be marked with tags indicating low water users. The association also has worked with a Phoenix newspaper on articles about selecting and maintaining desert plants.

The Desert Botanical Garden in Phoenix and the Boyce Thompson Southwestern Arboretum in Superior display for public view fine examples of desert landscaping plants. Supplying desert plants also ranks as a challenge to the Arizona landscape industry.

Transplanting desert plants, once considered impractical, is becoming an industry, Martino says. Now plants typically unavailable from commercial sources—large desert trees, saguaro, cholla—are salvaged from development sites and replaced when the development is completed. Or they may be moved to revegetate another site.

"There's a lot of potential as we become more aware of how to use it and grow it," Mohlenbrock says. "Expect to see a lot more creativity in the landscape of the Southwest." **LM**