

FROM WIMPY TO WOW

DROUGHT-TOLERANT PLANTS
TRANSFORM A CHALLENGING SPACE

BY AENNE CARVER • PHOTOGRAPHY BY WILL GULLETTE

OLIVENHAIN HOMEOWNERS MARK AND LAURA LOTZ had a dilemma: What were they going to do about the plethora of landscape problems surrounding and bordering their driveway?

Along its edge were long, narrow beds planted with humdrum strips of lawn. On the space adjacent to the driveway the list of woes included dry shade, full sun with reflected heat, poor, thin soil and a difficult slope. Additionally, one side of the driveway baked in daylong sun while the other side languished in deep shade.

Ideally, Mark and Laura wanted the area to have more pizzazz, and yet be water wise and low maintenance. "The lawn had become a big chore," says Mark. "Not only did I have to mow in full



Above: The sunny side of the driveway offers surprising details tucked in among the rocks, like this tipped urn with a prickly rat-tail cactus pouring out like water.

Left: Mark and Laura Lotz's Olivenhain home is complemented by the water-wise landscape featuring sunset-hued rocks, pygmy date palms, smoky purple 'Zwartkop' aeonium, and contrasting, yellow flowering succulents.



sun, uphill, but the area used too much water.” Eager for a change, especially after their four children were now out of the nest, they contacted Mia McCarville.

Although McCarville is best known for Cedros Gardens, her picturesque Solana Beach nursery, she also is recognized for her ability to translate an exquisite sense of style into versatile, classic landscape designs. Ten years ago, the couple learned first hand of McCarville’s design mastery when she planned the landscaping for their backyard. It was no wonder that when Mark and Laura decided to get help on their driveway project, the first person they thought of was McCarville — their “secret weapon.”

McCarville began this new project by amending the poor soil. Step two was to choose boulders, rocks and gravel to unify the separate beds lining the driveway and to serve as the transition from bed to driveway, with stones gradually getting smaller until they seem to meld with the pavement. McCarville suggested that the larger boulders be dug into the earth, noting that in Japanese gardens large rocks are buried with only their tips protruding, like earthbound icebergs. Although McCarville did not go to this extreme, she pointed out that rocks simply set on the surface never look natural.

For step three, choosing plant material, McCarville proposed cactus and succulents. At first, Laura was unsure about drought-tolerant plants. “I thought of those stereotypical Southwest yards with nothing but white rocks and the occasional cactus,” Laura says. “Luckily, I trusted Mia. The finished landscape suits our Mediterranean-style home, and it is more interesting than our labor-intensive lawn.”



Even though the finished design looks effortless, it was a challenge to find plants for such diverse conditions. It came as no surprise, however, that McCarville, whose own nursery is filled with unique plants, managed to procure a compelling collection of succulent varieties to transform the landscape. She found several that flourish in shade such as the panda plant (*Kalanchoe tomentosa*), flower dust plant (*Kalanchoe pumila*) and dinner-plate aeonium (*Aeonium tabuliforme*).

McCarville also added her signature touch with unusual plants like the ‘Queen’s Tears’ bromeliad (*Billbergia nutans*), a mysterious beauty with dark, grass-like leaves and pendulous flowers, which she tucked in among the

Above: This uncommon bromeliad, ‘Queen’s Tears’ (*Billbergia nutans*) nods gracefully throughout the shady bed.

Left: The driveway’s north side is anchored by variegated false agave and punctuated with shade-dwelling succulents like the flower dust plant, blue-glow agave, panda plant and dinner-plate aeonium.

boulders. Another unexpected choice was Moses-in-the-cradle (*Tradescantia spathacea*) with purple, cream and blush lining its leaves. Although this plant looks tropical, it is drought tolerant.

Turning from the shady bed to the sunny side, where the harmony of the rocks and the repetition of shapes visually link the spaces, sun-dwelling agaves in circular rosettes echo the shape of the shade-loving aeoniums on the other side. McCarville softened the sun-baked bed with waves of low-growing gray ‘Chalk Fingers’ (*Cotyledon* sp.), the cookie plant (*Crassula arborescens*) and trailing ice plant (*Lampranthus deltoides*). The hues of these plants contrast well with the orange-red of the African milk tree (*Euphorbia trigona* ‘Red’) and the rose-orange in the ‘Pink Perfection’ aloe flowers.

Height in this bed comes from an olive tree (*Olea Europe*), and a ‘Desert Museum’ Palo Verde (*Parkinsonia* x ‘Desert Museum’) brimming with wispy foliage and frothy yellow blooms. Textural interest continues with many varieties of aloes, euphorbias and tulip agaves (*Agave parry*). Unexpected touches emerge, such as a tipped terra-cotta urn with a rat-tail cactus (*Aporocactus flagelliformis*) spilling out like water.

The sunny bed ends as it wraps around the parking area at the top of the drive and abuts a steep hill. McCarville’s design flows on to the hillside that once held scruffy ivy. Now this area is punctuated with iridescent, golden barrel cacti (*Echinocactus grusonii*), tequila (or blue) agave (*Agave tequilana*) and an amazing, almost-white cactus-like plant, the variegated African candelabra (*Euphorbia ammak variegata*).

McCarville took the driveway landscape from wimpy to wow by bringing in drought-tolerant style (Mark says water usage has been cut back by 40- to 50-percent) and year-round color. Laura summarizes: “We spent most of our lives in the Midwest, and we were used to the cottage-garden look — lush and green. When we were ready for a change, Mia showed us the wealth of drought-tolerant riches that are available in our beautiful San Diego climate.” ♦

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Right: Desert-colored rocks and splashes of yellow-flowered succulents fill the sunny side of the driveway, while clumps of gray ‘Chalk Fingers’ offer a soft contrast to the burnt-orange flowering aloes.

Below: Aloe ‘Pink Perfection’ is a favorite in midwinter when little else is blooming.

