



# Natural Selection

A property in Westlake proves that with clever planting, xeriscapes can be abundant, green spaces of almost Edenic lushness

BY CARLA AVOLIO

**X**eriscapes suffer from an image problem. These drought-resistant gardens, which can survive on nothing but rain, have a reputation for being limited, barren and, well... ugly. But for a 2,000-square-foot xeriscape in Westlake, this couldn't be further from the truth.

Set in front of a mid-century modern home, the lush garden is blanketed with gold-tipped grasses, silver-barked persimmon, sculptural agave and verdant mountain laurels that drip with purple blossoms in spring. The garden represents a fine example of how to sustainably beautify a space that, in 2011, was one of just six properties on the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center's annual gardens tour.

"I was so happy when the Wildflower Center chose to feature this," says Robert Leeper, principal of Robert Leeper Landscapes and the brains behind the project. "It is really hard to achieve a xeriscape that's also beautiful. We have spent years working out what looks really good without water."

It's no secret that Central Texas is in the midst of a serious drought, which is why more and more garden professionals like Leeper are championing the use of native and well-adapted plants that are perfectly suited to Austin's extreme climate. "Water is the most serious factor facing our profession," he says. "But at the same time, we're not Arizona. Our

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Russian sage, agave and five types of grasses are part of the new landscape at the front of the house (top), while a single mountain laurel tree occupies an awkward space (above) that was created after the construction of a wall.

ED LEHMANN (TOP); NICOLE MLAKAR



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water-wise gardens don’t have to be all gravel. They can feel alive and lush because a lot of plant life can be supported here. You just need to pick the right plants.”

Given this ethos, Leeper was delighted when homeowners Mike Pagani and Kathy Preisler, who had lived in California for 15 years and were already firmly on the low-water bandwagon, approached him in 2010. “When Mike and Kathy came to me, they had two requirements: no irrigation and no lawn,” says Leeper. “It’s very rare for me to have clients say this. Usually, I’m trying to convince people just to reduce the amount of lawn they have.”

The property’s existing garden—a sizable circle drive in front of the house—was anathema to

a landscape designer like Leeper. “It was one of those typical, huge 1950s front yards that had been planted with Saint Augustine, which in the sun requires the most water,” he says.

Leeper set about clearing away the remnant landscape, leaving only the mature trees, which included a striking Texas persimmon. “This is one of our best native plants,” he says. “It has smooth, silvery bark and a distinctive form that looks wonderfully sculptural.”

Around the tree, Leeper planted Russian sage, agave and five types of grasses: Mexican feather grass, big muhly, deer muhly, Gulf muhly and little bluestem. Color was introduced via pink skullcap, native lantana and a smattering of wildflower seeds. “I was taking my cues from the surrounding land,” he says. “I didn’t want it to look monochromatic. I wanted a variety of heights and textures so it looked like a natural extension of the Westlake hills.”

Elsewhere on the property, Leeper con-

tinued his approach of embracing the local vernacular: Lueders limestone coping around the swimming pool, a single mountain laurel invigorating an awkward space left

**Leeper added Lueders limestone coping around the swimming pool (left) and, in an effort to keep the xeriscaping from looking too monochromatic, planted Russian sage (bottom).**

after the construction of a wall, and concrete containers—planted with vibrant varieties like a coral-hued blossoming aloe—made by Jackson Pottery of Dallas.

With the containers, Leeper allowed himself to relax his principles somewhat. “This is the one place where we can add a bit of water and if something dies, we don’t feel terrible replacing it.”

That was a small concession in a project founded on impeccable ideals. “It was such a thrill to have more than 1,000 people visit this garden in a single day [on the tour],” says Leeper. “It is my hope that people will be inspired by this and think, Wow, you can have a landscape that uses less water but is still beautiful. Because for Austin, that’s the future.” ▲



NICOLE MILAKAR (3)