

Written and produced by Nan Sterman
Photography by Ed Gohlich

Low-Water Landscape

A Los Angeles couple swap their lawn for a front yard of colorful succulents and herbs suited to their arid climate.

Opposite: Los Angeles-based landscape designer Renee Gunter designed this coral-reef-inspired low-water garden for the 740-square-foot yard in front of Marina Moevs and Steven Peckman's historical Craftsman home. *This photo:* Shimmering aqua chalk fingers of *Senecio mandraliscae* reach for the sun.

HISTORICALLY, GRASS WAS the front yard turf for the 2,000 bungalows in Steven Peckman and Marina Moevs' inner-city neighborhood, but the couple couldn't justify its excessive need for water in arid Los Angeles. A low-profile, drought-tolerant garden fronting their 1909 Craftsman bungalow, they thought, would be true to the original intent but more climate-appropriate. The City of Los Angeles agreed. It was offering a "cash for grass" rebate of \$1 for every square foot of

grass replaced by low-water landscape. The rebate would cover removal costs for all 740 square feet of the front lawn's tired Bermudagrass and weeds.

Steven intended to do all the work himself but was soon overwhelmed. Instead, he and Marina turned to friend and designer Renee Gunter. She had designed several low-water gardens in the neighborhood, including her own. Gunter's philosophy of sustainability and her design artistry aligned perfectly with the couple's vision.





Her design features an undulating swath of gravel that cuts horizontally across the property. The gravel represents a dry riverbed whose flow softens the hard edges of two rectangular beds flanking the front walkway. Gentle mounds of soil symbolize mountains that slope down to the riverbed. At the bottom, succulents suggest undersea creatures. Aside from their aesthetic intent, the contours pool meager rainfall at thirsty plant roots.

The color palette was drawn from Caribbean coral reefs. Gunter combined soft- and bold-texture succulents such as blue-green chalk fingers (*Senecio mandraliscae*), teal-and-coral

Echeveria rosettes, orangey *Euphorbia* ‘Sticks on Fire’, and red-tipped yellow ‘Pork and Beans’ sedums. Lacy green *Santolina* and purple-leaved *Tradescantia* enhance the contrast.

Uphill from the riverbed, plants transition to midsize varieties native to California and other dry Mediterranean climates. Native Cleveland sage (*Salvia clevelandii*), lemon thyme, lavenders, and mounding rosemaries have leaves that perfume the air with their resinous oils.

The garden’s irrigation comes from a handheld plastic watering can. “With a lawn, you water every day or every other day,” Steven says. “We water every two months, even when it gets really

hot.” The rest of the year, months can pass with no need to pull out the watering can at all.

Steven and Marina already loved the colorful low-water garden, but when hummingbirds—drawn to sages and plants with tubular flowers, such as agaves and penstemons—arrived to build their nest, they knew they had something really special. The garden was not quite a year old when the hummingbirds first came, but the colorful mélange was already attracting human visitors. Steven noticed cars that sped down the street then hit their brakes hard in front of the garden. The couple’s social circle expanded as neighbors walking by stopped to admire plants and to chat.



Above left: Mounds of succulent and nonsucculent plants billow in the almost-no-water garden. Above: Steven and Marina linger on the front porch to enjoy the garden before heading to work.

This photo: Undulating mounds dotted with anemone- and sea urchin-shape succulents, including pale blue *Echeveria runyonii* 'Topsy Turvy', green-and-red *Echeveria agavoides* 'Lipstick', pink-tinged *Crassula perforata* 'Variegata', and red-stem *Crassula raddikins*, create an underwater effect.



Today, Steven and Marina plan extra time in the garden before leaving for work in the morning. "It's a different life from having a front lawn," Marina says. "A front lawn is there like a cement walk is there, like the asphalt street is there. You don't have a relationship with it. The garden's life, on the other hand, is so evident that you develop a relationship—it is a living being. We want to pause in it, see what's happening, admire it. It's almost like interacting with a person."

Marina's philosophical observations echo her artwork. She paints metaphysical landscapes that, she says, examine "how we understand who we are and our relationship, by extension, to others

and the environment." Environmental issues such as global warming, water conservation, and sustainability are critical themes to her and to Steven, who is assistant director of the Broad Stem Cell Research Center at University of California, Los Angeles.

Steven and Marina's garden is a wonderful demonstration of their support for sustainable landscapes, particularly in the inner city. As Steven says, "You can have a beautiful front yard without a lawn, one that requires little maintenance yet changes every day and in a beautiful way...the investment you make pays off in the long run with great savings and great beauty."

Low-Water Container

In the ground or in a container, succulents add color and texture to the garden.

Succulent containers, like others, look best when they echo the surrounding architecture and landscape. The rib pattern on this tall, cylindrical planter complements the home's Craftsman styling. A rosette-shape coral aloe (*Aloe striata*) anchors the composition, and a deep burgundy hybrid *Echeveria* tucked into the corner enhances the aloe's reddish blush. Curled green leaves of trailing jade (*Senecio jacobsenii*) cascade over the rim, while the blue-green stems of tall slipper plant (*Pedilanthus bracteatus*) pick up the tones of the home's green-stained shake siding. The slipper plant blooms coral, much like the aloe.





Renee Gunter

Drought-Resistant Plants

Renee Gunter of Urbanscapes for Sustainable Living in Los Angeles says she strives to create living spaces “that have a freedom about them, a joyful wildness and exuberant use of sustainable plantings bold in color and texture.”

1. *Sedum rubrotinctum* ‘Pork and Beans’
2. *Kalanchoe fedtschenkoi* ‘Variegata’ (variegated lavender scallops)
3. *Echeveria pulvinata*
4. *Kalanchoe luciae* (flapjack plant)
5. *Senecio vitalis* (narrow-leaf chalkstick)
6. *Cereus* spp.
7. *Tradescantia pallida* ‘Purple Heart’
8. *Euphorbia tirucalli* ‘Sticks on Fire’
9. *Graptopetalum* hybrid
10. *Echeveria agavoides* ‘Lipstick’
11. *Senecio vitalis* (narrow-leaf chalksticks)
12. *Aloe brevifolia*
13. *Gaura lindheimeri* (pink guara)
14. *Echeveria* ‘Afterglow’
15. *Anacampseros telephiastrum*
16. *Crassula orbicularis*
17. *Sempervivum calcareum*
18. *Helychrisum petiolare* ‘Limelight’
19. *Crassula atropurpurea* var. *anomala*
20. *Crassula arborescens*
21. *Echeveria gibbiflora*
22. *Rosmarinus officinalis prostratus*
23. *Carex testacea*
24. *Echeveria* ‘Etna’
25. *Crassula* ‘Campfire’
26. *Crassula radicans*
27. *Echeveria pulidonis*
28. *Echeveria runyonii* ‘Topsy Turvy’
29. *Crassula perforata* ‘Variegata’ (variegated necklace vine)
30. *Agave americana* ‘Mediopicta Alba’ (white-striped century plant)



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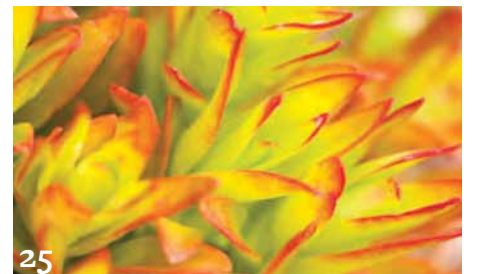
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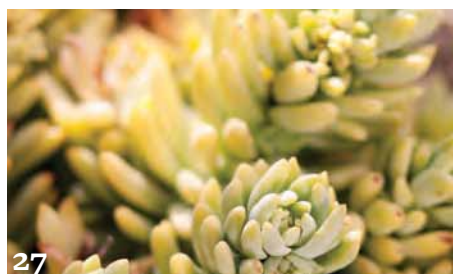
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