



Balancing Act

A REVAMPED PHOENIX GARDEN PROVIDES A MULTISENSORY EXPERIENCE

Text by Suzanne Pickett Martinson • Photography by Charles Mann • Illustration by Paul Janovsky

When Beverly and Brian Burch first saw their 2-acre property in Phoenix three and a half years ago, the landscape was concealed by overgrowth, most of it dead. Tree canopies had fallen heavily to the ground, and planters and raised garden beds were filled with out-of-control and unknown plants. “It was a sight,” Beverly remembers. “The kids and I spent days cutting and raking and piling debris. It was a mess, but it definitely had potential.”

She had envisioned an environment filled with flowers and foliage, a place where the children could play and swim, and an area where the couple would be able to relax and entertain. To help bring that potential to reality, the Burches called upon Phoenix landscape designer and horticulturist Tesfaye Gulilat and architect Jonathan Martens, AIA, of Martens & Associates in Phoenix.



Visitors to this central Phoenix home often find themselves drawn toward the entry courtyard. Here, a lively mix of scarlet flax and desert wildflowers winds its way around an outer wall toward a large ceramic pot planted with sweet peas, giant bird of paradise, blue salvia and bat-faced cuphea.



To start, an outdoor kitchen was constructed, and the existing pool and tennis court were renovated. Martens, who remodeled the Burch home, designed the front courtyard, back patio, planters, potting shed and additional hardscape elements that would serve as the backdrop for the landscape. The biggest hit among family and friends, however, was the creation of the children's treehouse, built around a gigantic pine tree that projects through the middle of the structure's roof. According to Beverly, "Brian and Jonathan had so much fun creating it, that you would have thought it was for them."

Beverly met Gulilat when she used to "sit outside his yard, staring at his gorgeous gardens. I finally got up the nerve to go up to him," she says. "He's been helping me ever since."

Gulilat admits that the Burch garden is one of his favorite projects. "I am so pleased with the progress we



are making," he says. "Working with the Burches and Jonathan from the beginning has been an important part of our success."


Indeed, the transformation has been remarkable. Gulilat's primary goal was to avoid interfering with the architecture but at the same time provide shade, curb appeal and functionality. His concept was to create a lush, tropical, yet sensible environment, one that complements both the home and Beverly's penchant for accumulating antique and flea market garden accessories. It was this collecting that motivated her to open her home furnishings and accessories shop, The Willows at Hilton (formerly The Willows at 44th Street).

Working with the desires of the homeowner and the existing hardscape is a balancing act when designing a garden, says Gulilat. "You also need to take into consideration the elements of the environment," he notes. "For this yard I worry more about frost than I do about the sun, since it is in one of most frost-prone areas of the Valley. That dictates the type of plants and placement considerations."

One of Beverly's favorite spots is the front courtyard, an intimate space that can be viewed from the main rooms of the home. To Gulilat, the courtyard is the perfect place to provide nectar for all the senses. "A garden should not just feast the eyes," he says. "Feeding the nose and ears is important, too. Walking through the courtyard should smell and sound heavenly."

To achieve this multisensory experience, he placed a trickling fountain in the center of an eclectic mix of climbing roses (Beverly's favorite plant), fragrant sweet olive bushes, orange and yellow African tulip trees (*Spathodea complutata*), striking yellow angel's trumpet shrubs, fishtail and Madagascar palms, and two *Pistacia lentiscus* trees that offer clean shade and protection from the frost. Dichondra, deep lavender dalea and multihue wildflowers soften the brick stepping stones, and exotic plants such as fishtail fern and the purple-leafed *Euphorbia continifolia* provide accents that complement Beverly's well-worn pots and garden furniture.

Pistacia lentiscus trees also were planted in the front yard, and instead of a formal berm, Mexican heather was used to create a



This photo: A wooden treehouse towers over a grassy sitting area. • Opposite, top: A plaque in a courtyard niche is set off by a black-and-white tile backdrop and colorful potted cyclamen. • Opposite, bottom: The homeowners' potting area is filled with flea market treasures and fun finds.



This photo: An assortment of garden furniture, statues and plantings accents a koi pond. Creeping fig vine climbs along a brick wall. • Opposite: Sitting among African irises, a lone cherub soaks up the sunlight at the edge of a rockbound waterfall.

colorful hedge-type border that effectively contains water from flood irrigation. More roses and wildflowers color the yard, and pine, olive and jacaranda trees produce needed shade. Two large bird of paradise plants in gigantic pots greet guests at the entrance to the courtyard.

Although not yet completed, another garden area Beverly is smitten with is located in the side yard to the south of the pool. Here, a wooden trellis signals the entrance to a quaint area where raised vegetable and flower beds host a variety of herbs, plus lettuce, broccoli, cabbage and strawberries. The space also is home to a fish pond with a waterfall, a potting shed and potting bench. Climbing roses and jasmine cover a fence that adjoins the pool.

In another area of the property, a grapevine-cloaked fence borders a tennis court. Sweet fig and citrus trees are scattered about the lawn, and an established pink crepe myrtle has managed to survive the Arizona sun, getting its moisture from the

nearby swimming pool. Gulilat says the next phase will concentrate on the walkway from the house to the tennis court area, where topiary and banana trees, along with a mix of tropical plants, will become the focal point.

Patience, explains Gulilat, is the key when establishing new plants. "Instant gratification is not the goal. Sometimes it takes several years for plants to reach their potential, and then it is all worth the effort."

With the foundation in place and plans for new projects on the drawing board, the gardens are thriving, thanks to Beverly's vision and the teamwork of Gulilat and Martens. Together they have transformed the big yard into a sensory paradise for the whole family.

"We spend as much time as possible outside," Beverly concludes. "Even in the summer, we find ourselves drawn to the yard. We are very happy here." 🌿

See Resource Guide.

