



Paths to Perfection

It has taken years, but one local gardener finally has the backyard of her dreams.

BY JUDITH RATLIFF | PHOTOGRAPHY BY AMY HASKELL

Talk about turning a challenge into an opportunity! One Tucsonan has created an extraordinary landscape out of a scrubby, desert lot that is cut in half by an arroyo 12 feet deep and 10 feet wide.

Valerie Housman's northeast-side backyard is a sumptuous year-round delight — full of art, music, color, wildlife, seasonal flowers and foliage displays, and an overall feeling of serenity.

This doubletake-worthy change took place slowly — over the course of 32 years — and required a series of creative, fearless decisions. But Valerie demurs on the topic of how visionary she has been. “I just get an idea and hire somebody to carry it out,” she says.

The first major inspiration was to insist that her architect locate the family pool at the back of the large lot on the far side of the arroyo, which to this day runs when it rains. “I felt we were trying to force a pool too close to the house just to save on building costs,” she says. “That was a legitimate concern, but I wanted to walk out the door and be engaged by a garden.”

This meant that getting to the pool was going to be an adventure, going down then up a winding pathway. “I love little pathways connecting different parts of a garden,” she asserts.

A native of Canada, Valerie admits, “I had a lot to learn when it came to what to plant here. The only significant plants on the lot, when we first saw it, were a few mesquite trees and a beautiful saguaro. I just started experimenting and to be honest, I’ve probably replanted the whole garden several times.”

Hardscape decisions, on the other hand, have been straightforward for Valerie, who has an intuitive sense of what will work and be interesting at the same time. The layout of the garden areas nearest the house follows the multiple levels, and many doors, of ▶

ABOVE One of several winding paths throughout Valerie Housman's garden.
OPPOSITE A brick bridge spans the arroyo that cuts the desert lot in half.
A metal gate and arbor marks the entrance to the pool patio.



the dwelling, which was designed by John Campisano to step up and down with the lay of the land. Exiting the main level of the house containing the public rooms, a visitor arrives on an elevated dining deck complete with a fireplace inset into an exterior wall. Valerie decorated the deck with pots and today, mature plantings arising from the ground, coupled with vine-covered railings, provide an immediate sense of greenery.

There is a lot to explore in the yard. An eye-catching brick bridge over the arroyo adds to the property's charm. A stairway leads to a whimsical purple bench tucked away in an evergreen garden sunny enough for a small patch of lawn. Steps lead to a lower terrace and shade garden where Valerie grows such difficult plants as hydrangeas under the boughs of a Chinese evergreen elm. Flagstone alternates with brick throughout the garden to great effect. A change in material often signals the transition from one garden room to another.

"The shade garden was once the kids' play area. The lawn used to be real, now it's synthetic. Life changes; you try new things. Building the bridge was bold, but it was necessary. After decades of erosion, the sides of the arroyo needed to be stabilized. We'd all enjoyed rambling up and down into it, but terracing the slopes so plants would quit sliding down made sense.

"Workers hauled in truckloads of rocks for these beds and it opened up all sorts of new planting possibilities; new perennial gardens and an enlarged rose garden along a flagstone pathway. Other terraced beds are planted more practically with masses of rosemary and lantana. There also are tough, dramatic succulents such as agaves and yuccas."

The addition of the bridge — which immediately connects a viewer on the deck visually to the gardens at the back of the lot — gives this landscape a surprising sense of sweep. Valerie's decision to erect a classic, wisteria-covered arbor at the entrance to the pool area and to plant vines to twine along the fencing, creates a bit of mystery about what lies across the bridge. Once reached, the pool patio features both raised planters containing accent plants, such as Mediterranean fan palms, and in-ground beds anchored by mesquites. Understory plants are primarily tough evergreen plantings, some repeat examples of ▶

RIGHT A container garden holds a mixture of cacti, herbs and color annuals.

OPPOSITE TOP An iris bed is home to a whimsical clay rabbit. **OPPOSITE BOTTOM** Rock gardens filled with cacti, yucca and aloe species line the sides of an arroyo.





materials used close to the house, including pineapple guava, myrtle, pittosporum, photinia and Indian hawthorn.

"We'd have a bigger view of the mountains without the trees," Valerie says, "but they add shade and atmosphere. It's a beautiful spot. People seldom have the chance to look back on their houses, especially lighted in the evening, and see how pretty they are. That's a great plus of a patio like this one."

Valerie took the opportunity during a master bedroom and bath remodel a few years ago to increase the enjoyment of the garden, adding a small patio, waterfall feature and an outdoor shower. There also are stairs connecting this space with the overall pathway system.

"Wendy of Wendy Lee Gardening works with me on the garden," Valerie says. "She replaces the perennials that are past their prime and plants things for the next season, including all the pots, which we do each May and November."

"It takes a village to keep this all going," Valerie says with a laugh. "It's a lot of work and it costs a lot, but it brings us great joy. There's always a surprise when I walk out the door; something new has bloomed, or the monarch butterflies have arrived meaning it's finally fall." **HG**

Judith Ratliff, MLA, is a Tucson landscape designer. She can be reached for comments at 577-7391.

Sources:

Interior Designer: Andrea Wachs Interior Design, <http://andrewachs.com>

Gardener: Wendy Lee Gardening, www.wendyleegardening.com



ABOVE A mixture of sprawling perennials grows among the boulders.
LEFT Colorful garden furniture can be found in various locations.



Iris



Foxglove



Lavender



Stock

“I wanted to walk out the door and be engaged by the garden.”
— Valerie Housman



Scabiosa



Statice



Pansies



Violas