Relax
Reimagine
Refresh
with
Color

Creating
COMFORT
Beautifully
Canary Island palms set a tropical scene for a menagerie of plants that includes potted agaves. “The trees create a huge microclimate of mixed gardens, providing wonderful opportunities for all these understories of exotic plants to thrive,” says landscape architect Russell Page.

GARDEN IN PARADISE

Surrounded by Desert, A Lush Landscape Flourishes
Under the Watchful Eye of Its Plant-Loving Owner

BY JUDY HARPER  PHOTOGRAPHY BY ART HOLEMAN
A SUCCESSFUL ATTORNEY WITH A LARGER-than-life personality, Glen Lerner loves to share his multilayered outdoor entertaining and garden spaces with friends and family, as well as neighbors who pass over the frons and ask for a tour. Boasting a cool, resortlike ambiance, the landscape is awash in layers of colors, textures, and shapes. Terraced slopes are filled with a luxuriant mix of palm trees, aloe, agaves and perennials. Splashing fountains are found at nearly every turn, with songbirds serenading from the canopy of trees above. Softened with carved borders along the boundaries, the garden envelops you and becomes more welcoming with each step.

"This is "Gentopia,"" the owner declares with a flash of his trademark smile.

The garden is quite an accomplishment, considering that when Glen and his wife, Robyn, bought the Paradise Valley home in 2010, the yard was barren except for a humdrum pool and a couple of palms and scraggly mesquite trees. The family had relocated from Las Vegas, Nevada, and wanted a fun backyard with plenty of posh. They turned to landscape architect Russell Grewe to create the lavish garden of their dreams.

According to the Phoenix Home & Garden Masters of the Southwest award winner, "The whole project is a reflection of how Glen likes to live and the degree of privacy that he values. He showed us pictures of his home in Las Vegas, and we took cues from those to create the gardens, landscape and pool."

TOP: A Mediterranean limestone fountain accented with purple lobelia establishes a focal point near the front entrance.

ABOVE: Grewe created the rotunda entry with a limestone parapet and added a tranquil star-shaped fountain with Santa Barbara tile to bring color and sound to the front door.
I have 31 varieties of palms, and more sago palms than anyone has a right to own, but I love it. It’s so peaceful.

—Glen Larsen, homeowner

A signature of the yard’s new look is its abundance of greenery. “While some people are collectors of coins or stamps, Glen is a collector of plants,” Greer notes. The look begins at the property’s long driveway. “We lined it with vegetation so that although it has a utilitarian purpose, it has really become an aisle of date palms, oak trees and dense vegetation leading to a sophisticated and calming star-shaped fountain near the front door that’s surrounded by even more palm trees. It’s very Mediterranean, with Glen’s Las Vegas flair.”

As the renovation project unfolded, Larsen found himself spending countless hours in the garden and quickly earned his gardening stripes as the seasons unfolded. He now rattles off plant variety names and points out unique qualities of each. And he came to the realization that he can’t hold back when it comes to certain species.

“When we started, Glen was fascinated with palm trees—date palms, Canary Island palms, Mexican blue palms, pindo palms, dwarf palms, sago palms,” Greer remarks. “We would be at the point when everything was planted and I thought we were done, and Glen would find 12 more palms that he wanted. So we would pull everything up and put the new ones in place, and then he would buy 12 more. Glen believes if three is good, then 20 is better and 40 is even greater. Now he’s into aloes and agaves,” the landscape architect adds with a grin. “It was fun to work with him because he had such passion and a ferocious appetite for gardening.”

Neat and symmetrical, the sparkling waterscape is lined with Medjool palm trees. Awaits in fiery reds, cooling purples and a rainbow of other hues, the garden is as stimulating as it is serene. Come nighttime, the Roman fountains spouting into the pool, which are lighted internally, look like beams of light arcing across the water.
Lerner agrees. “It’s a labor of love, cathartic for me,” he says. “I don’t golf, I work, and I work out, so this is relaxation for me—something to obsess over that’s not work-related. I wake up every day wondering what I can put in today. I have 31 varieties of palms, and more sage palms than anyone has a right to own, but I love it. It’s so peaceful. We are very blessed.”

Sheltered by a wall of palms, the backyard is also an aquatic oasis, with a dramatic pool that was an integral part of the renovation. Situated as a focal point visible from the home’s living room, the pool is flanked by two ramadas and includes numerous water features, fire pots, a pedestrian crossover, grotto and an upper deck with a spa, fireplace and a pair of giant hand-carved Mexican limestone fountains.

“It’s a very family-friendly, playful pool that is also very elegant,” Greer comments. “We lined up the pool area to pull the eye to a terminus—almost a vanishing point—which makes it feel much bigger than it is. The pool is 50 feet long, but it looks like it might be stretch 200 feet as it draws the eye to the spa and fireplace. The spa also provides a great view of the house, especially when it is lit at night. I like to get my clients away from their house so they can look back from the spa and really appreciate their beautiful home and its multitude of spaces.”

Guests can wander the length of the backyard and enjoy a variety of distinct open-air settings, including seating areas with cozy fireplaces, burbling fountains and comfortable furnishings. Hidden garden “rooms” continue to unveil throughout the 3-acre site, including a wine garden by the guest house, an intimate patio with a fireplace and another with a shaded spot to take an alfresco shower. There’s even a play station “hospital” in a rear corner for foliage that needs some extra TLC.

“I love to open the doors to my courtyard garden in the mornings and feel the sun and smell the...
An outdoor kitchen and dining area is situated along the drive near the front entrance. The double-sided fireplace opens to a flower bed and the star-shaped fountain by the front door. Orange blossoms when they are in bloom," Robyn remarks. "I simply adore having so much citrus around the property to cook with, not to mention my herb garden. It makes my heart sing." As she speaks, her husband saunters through the citrus grove and pops a green kumquat into his mouth. "Would you care for an orange, lemon or perhaps a pomegranate?" he asks. "I love kumquats so much that I can't resist eating them, even before they're ripe."

Glen also enjoys sharing the bounty from his garden with friends and visitors alike. "Everyone who comes to his home is offered a grapefruit or maybe a mandarin orange," says Grecy. "He's like a kid in a candy store. It's as if he's just picked a tangelo for the first time."

Making sure the citrus and other plants continue to thrive and produce and keeping the surrounding terrain looking sumptuous year-round requires constant maintenance. Larry Kadomoto, the Lerners' full-time groundskeeper, affirms that the garden maximizes every inch and is ever-evolving. "It's such a peaceful, quiet space," he notes. "I've seen an incredible variety of wildlife here—lizards and birds, baby owls, a bobcat and even a small turtle walking up the driveway. I close my eyes, and all I hear is water splashing and birds chirping. It feels like I'm in a Costa Rican jungle."

Lerner surveys the property every day, caring for new plants and checking in on established favorites, taking in the sweet fragrance of star jasmine, snacking on kumquats and keeping a watchful eye out for—what else?—open space for additional aloes and agaves. "That is what 'Climoopia' is all about," he quips, "making sure that all of the plants are happy."

ABOVE: Dwarf boxwood hedges combine with structural elements in a relaxed and romantic way in the outdoor kitchen, which features a built-in grill, plenty of counter space, a table for 10 and a comfy seating area. A handmade wooden pergola defines the outdoor room while allowing dappled light to filter onto the table.

LEFT: Scattered throughout the garden, groupings of colorful flowers in eye-catching pots mingle with the textured trunks of palm trees for a dynamic effect. See Sources.