

The Edible Landscape Project

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Joan Baron (above) says her Crimson seedless grapevines (top) made a “stunning comeback” after the Phoenix area’s hard freeze this past January.

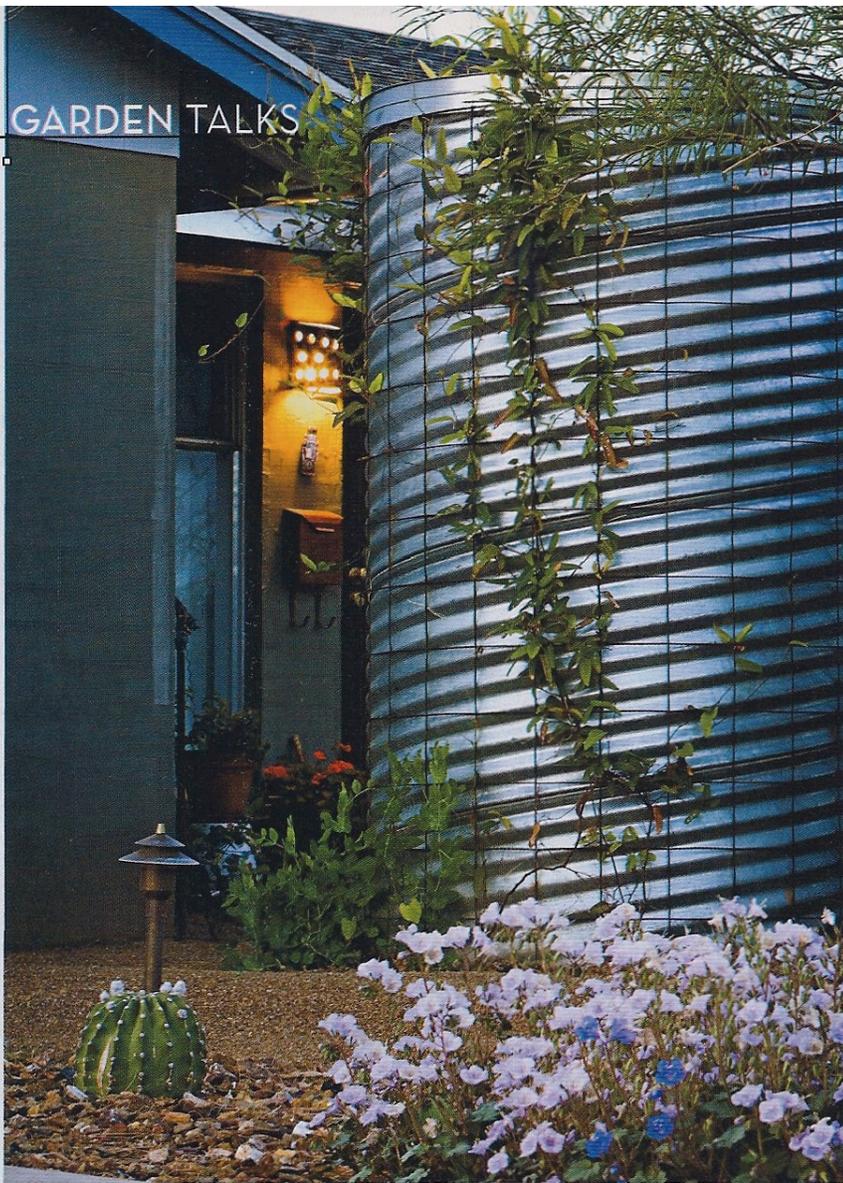
Artist **Joan Baron** creates an environmentally friendly gardenscape

Tile artist Joan Baron has lived in her Scottsdale neighborhood since 1980. When another house on her street went on the market two years ago, she decided to buy and renovate it as a rental home with features “I’d enjoy living with,” she says. “I challenged myself to create a totally edible landscape that would be desert-friendly and sustainable,” she adds. “I approached this redesign much as I would a public art installation, integrating a respect for the land with an awareness of its many functions.”

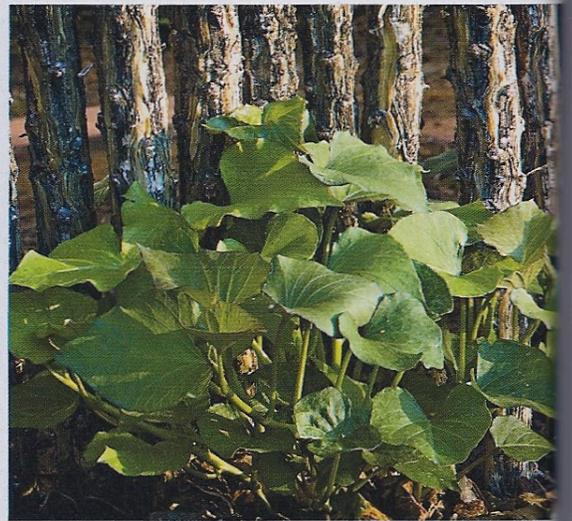
To help realize her artistic vision, which she calls the Edible Landscape

Project, Baron enlisted permaculture designers and teachers Don Titmus and Jay Johnson. “Permaculture is a design process that strives to link all elements, such as the environment, landscape and home, into an interconnected whole,” tutors Titmus. As an example, he explains that Baron’s design includes a cistern that collects fresh rainwater, which helps nourish a nearby raised spiral vegetable garden. The attractive spiral is located just 10 feet from the front door. While the plants’ beauty can be enjoyed daily, the proximity of the garden to the home provides easy access for maintenance and harvesting.

GARDEN TALKS



Left: A metal culvert converted into a water-harvesting cistern collects water that initially runs off the roof and into a rain gutter. Potable (safe to drink) backwash water from the home's indoor water-purification system also is directed into the receptacle. Lilac vine (*Hardenbergia*) is supported by a metal grid wrapped around the barrel. **Below:** A sweet potato plant grows against a living fence of ocotillo branches. **Bottom:** A pathway leading to the front door is planted with colorful annuals, as well as basil, epazote, lemon grass, romaine lettuce and snap peas.

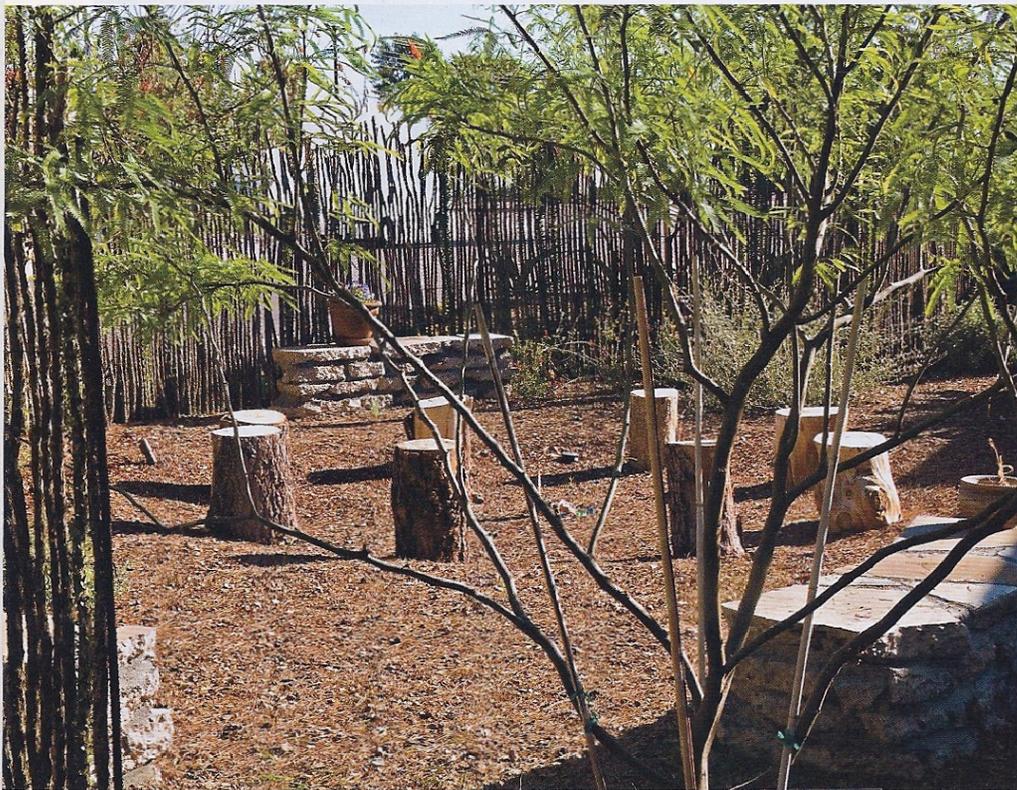


Baron credits both Titmus and Johnson with explaining the importance of choosing appropriate plants and siting them according to the property's sun exposure. The front yard's original landscape had several concrete elements that made the space unusable and unbearably hot on summer afternoons. "Concrete expanses absorbed heat, creating a heat-island effect, and plants weren't properly placed to offer shade," she notes.

Working off of Titmus' design, Eric Mytko of Life's A Garden handled the renovation. In the front yard, he removed the neglected lawn, concrete and an allergen-producing olive tree. Baron explains: "I chose to replace the heat-retaining concrete driveway and sidewalk with decomposed granite in a cinnamon blend that lends a natural transition to other areas of the landscape." Unlike concrete, decomposed granite is a permeable surface that allows rain to easily soak into the ground.



GARDEN TALKS



Concrete chunks were recycled to form benches and a spiral garden.

The backyard offered limited space for entertaining. Thus, an area in the front yard was converted to serve that purpose. "When [people] create landscapes, [they] tend to put all their energy into the backyard," observes Baron. "The land in front is a lost opportunity." Mytko planted a "living" ocotillo wall, which defines the newly designed gathering space. Individual ocotillo limbs, in time, will develop roots and sprout leaves and flowers. "The ocotillo wall creates a natural privacy screen while still allowing airflow, a sculptural porosity," Baron says.

Left: Baron created a gathering area with natural seating crafted from tree logs. Recycled concrete was used to make the benches.

Opposite: Nasturtiums, romaine lettuce and fava bean plants thrive in her edible garden.



RAINWATER HARVESTING

“Rain is such a valuable commodity in the desert,” states the homeowner. “It just made sense to me that we should collect it to use during our dry spells.” To capture and store rain off the roof of the house, she installed a 400-gallon cistern made from an 8-foot-long section of metal culvert set upright. “I had a stainless steel rain gutter fabricated for the front to add a more Modernist look,” she explains.

Using the roof as a pathway to guide the rain was easy, according to Baron. “We didn’t have to build anything new. The roof was already there as a natural piece of the solution. All that was required was a rain gutter to guide the water to a collection basin.”

Baron chose to situate the cistern in the front yard, visible from the street, to use as a demonstration for those interested in this eco-friendly idea. “As I learned about different techniques to harvest rainwater, many of which have been used for hundreds of years in various forms, it amazed me that our society isn’t encouraging this as a standard part of new construction,” she comments. “Using rainwater to feed our gardens doesn’t require a lot of financial investment.”



Above: Arizona poppies and an octopus agave flourish beside an ocotillo “fence” that is starting to bloom. The ocotillo’s leaves and flowers can be used in teas. **Opposite:** Kale and other edibles are grown in a “salad spiral” made of reclaimed concrete.

Swales are another rainwater-harvesting method that Titmus incorporated into the design. Swales are earthen mounds and depressions that naturally channel rainwater, allowing it to soak into the ground in desired locations, rather than run off the property to disappear down storm drains.

“We don’t want water to collect near a home’s foundation, where moist soil encourages termites,” Titmus explains. Instead, his strategy is to move the rain away from the house, where plants can be placed to benefit from the moisture.

EDIBLE LANDSCAPING

Low-water-use ‘Desert Museum’ thornless mesquite trees were planted in the

front yard for color and shade. “I also wanted mesquite because the pods can be ground into a nutritious flour,” Baron says. “Every part of the tree has a useful function, a true holistic icon of what the desert has to offer us.”

The spiral garden is planted with seasonal vegetables such as beets, carrots, chard, kale and lettuce. Metal mesh wrapped around the cistern serves as trellising for melon, beans and other vines.

Along a narrow side yard, Johnson recommended growing guava and mango trees, frost-sensitive tropicals that benefit from the protected microclimate. In the backyard, edible plants include ‘Anna’ apple, Asian pear, ‘Desert Gold’ peach, fig, grape, lime, plum and pomegranate. A second rain gutter toward the back of the house directs rain below ground, where it travels through perforated pipe to deep-water the young fruit trees.

Tucked against the home’s back wall, a small herb garden thrives. With a southern exposure, its sunny location has allowed



warm-season basil plants to survive into the winter. Bamboo screening provides relief from intense sun in summer.

Every plant in the new landscape has a function. Baron points out desert plants traditionally used for therapeutic purposes, including brittlebush, creosote, globe mallow and wolfberry. Even annual flowers such as calendula and nasturtium were added because they are edible. “They look great tossed in a salad,” she notes.

Baron believes gardens “welcome us to create community” in small steps, by sharing a bountiful harvest or helping a neighbor plant a shade tree. “Sometimes the challenges of the world seem overwhelming, making it hard for individuals to feel they have anything positive to offer,” states Baron. “I remind people to go out into the garden and put their hands into the soil. Reconnecting with the earth is powerful medicine.”

Baron’s permaculture landscape design drawing can be seen at 4dirs.com/fdpc/drawings.html. ☐

See Sources.