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GARDEN BONUS

Agaves, olive trees, phormiums, and red-flowered kangaroo paws thrive on little water outside this front wall in Santa Barbara.

Lush & low-water

A good water-wise garden starts with unthirsty plants and a few key rules

BY SHARON COHOON

Garden bonus


A dry garden can look as lush as any other.

>> Start by leaving more areas unplanted than you would if you lived in a wetter climate—a big water savings right off the top. >> Make the paths generous and put gravel under seating areas instead of planting a groundcover. >> Use decomposed granite in place of thirsty lawn grass. >> Then plant the remaining spaces with ornamentals that are adapted to arid climates. >> Finally, add a few traces of water, some real, some illusionary—a fountain that barely trickles, a dry stream bed that awaits the next downpour, or a classy urn as a stand-in for a rain barrel.

The garden pictured on these pages shows how this strategy works. Owners Nancy Franco and Don Olson wanted unthirsty plants outside the front gate of their Santa Barbara property, and a meadow inside. Designer Margaret Grace gave them a meadow, but a distinctly California one—with tawny grasses and drought-tolerant wildflowers such as blue-eyed grass and yarrow. A creek bed running through it is dry most of the year, as the creeks in the West often are, but it collects and channels rainfall effectively when the time comes.

During winter and spring, the garden gets by on rainfall alone. In summer and fall, it is drip-irrigated once a week. “This meadow garden may look lush,” Grace says, “but waterwise, its needs are pretty darn modest.”

DESIGN Margaret Grace, Grace Design Associates, Santa Barbara (gracedesignassociates.com or 805/687-3569)



A meadow of grasses and perennials that resemble wildflowers complements the garden's existing birch trees.

Elements of a water-wise landscape

PERMEABLE PAVING

Wide paths of Del Rio gravel encircle the central meadow. The permeable surface allows rainwater to percolate into the soil and reach plant roots. The material also suits the garden's relaxed mood.

STEVEN A. GUNTHER



BOULDERS

Big chunks of local sandstone add drama to the garden without needing an ounce of water, and they contribute to the wild meadow look the homeowners were after.

UNTHIRSTY PLANTS

All these choices thrive in dry conditions, from the autumn moor grass in the central island to the echinaceas, the chocolate-brown smoke tree, and the 'Mermaid' climbing rose atop the wall behind it.

FOCAL POINT

Although mountain flax can tolerate dry conditions almost as well as the rest of the plants in the garden, this one looks best with a bit more water. In a container, it can be irrigated more frequently than the rest of the yard, and it makes a striking accent.

WATER JARS

Like a dry creek bed, an empty urn suggests water without actually using any. The simplicity of its shape also makes it an ideal accent for this casual garden.

Garden bonus

The plants

In the Olson-Franco garden, the following plants get watered once a week or less, except where noted.

1. LION'S TAIL (*Leonotis leonurus*). A shrub in the mint family, with showy orange flowers summer through fall.

2. YARROW (*Achillea millefolium*). Carefree perennial with flat-topped flower clusters summer through fall. Many varieties; 'Paprika' is pictured.

3. KANGAROO PAW (*Anigozanthos*). Upright perennial with swordlike leaves and fuzzy, tubular flowers over a long season; flowers attract hummingbirds. Best with regular irrigation.

4. AGAVE (*A. attenuata* 'Nova'). Smaller than the species, but still an impressive 3 feet wide. Broader, bluer leaves too.

5. STRAWBERRY TREE (*Arbutus unedo*). Shrubby plant usually trained as a tree to show off its handsome red-brown, shredding bark.

6. MOUNTAIN FLAX (*Phormium cookianum* 'Cream Delight'). Needs a bit more water than *P. tenax* varieties, but much showier; leaves are creamy yellow with green margins.

7. ECHINACEA Tough perennial with daisy-like flowers. Leave the center cones when the blooms fade—finches love the seeds.

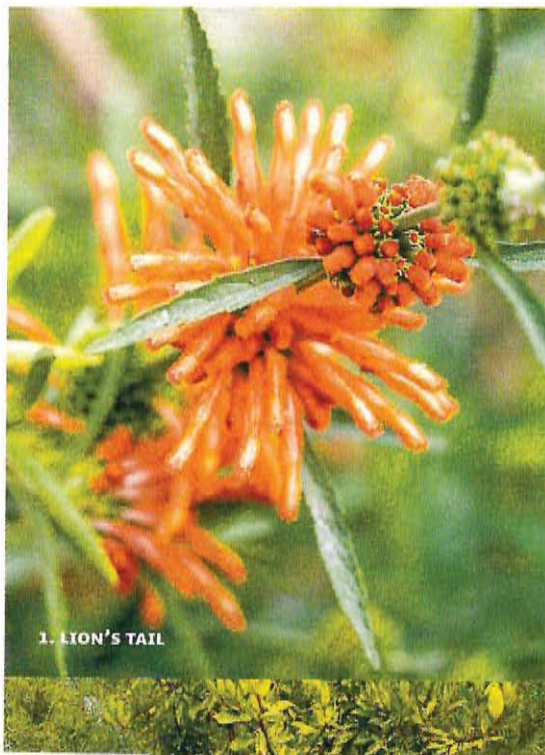
8. AUTUMN MOOR GRASS (*Sesleria autumnalis*). Ornamental grass that grows in upright, tufted mounds. Flower spikes start blooming in late spring in mild climates, fall elsewhere.

9. GIANT DUTCHMAN'S PIPE (*Aristolochia gigantea*). Tropical vine with fleshy flowers a half-foot wide. Blooms summer through early winter. Needs regular water, but included for its spectacular flowers.

10. ECHEVERIA Rosette-shaped, fleshy-leaved plants native to Mexico. One of the prettiest groups of succulents, especially when paired with 'Tricolor' sedum as pictured.

11. FOUNTAIN GRASS (*Pennisetum setaceum* 'Rubrum'). Clumping grass to 5 feet tall and wide, with purplish red leaves and rose-colored plumes that fade to beige.

12. LAMB'S EARS (*Stachys byzantina*). Woolly leaved plant that grows in thick, ground-hugging rosettes. Small purplish flowers attract bees.



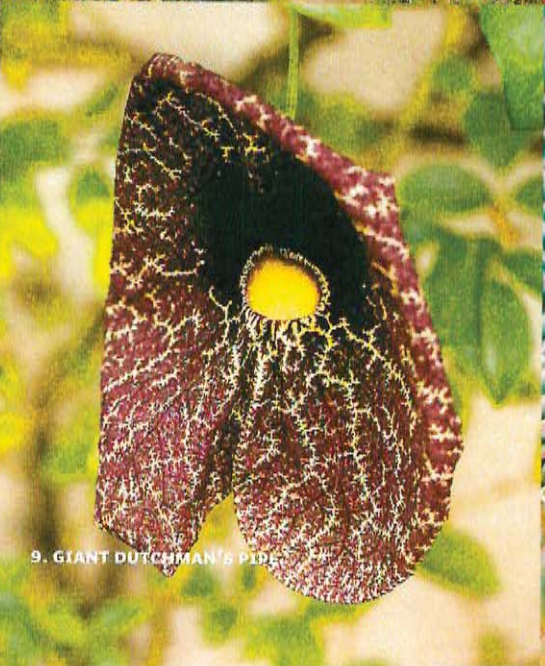
1. LION'S TAIL



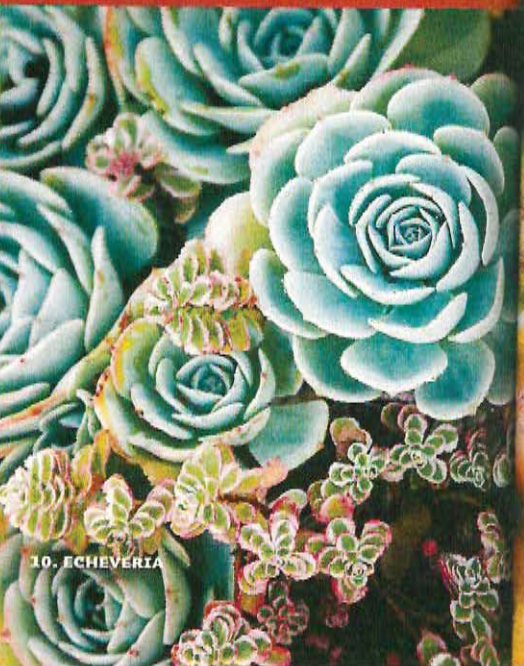
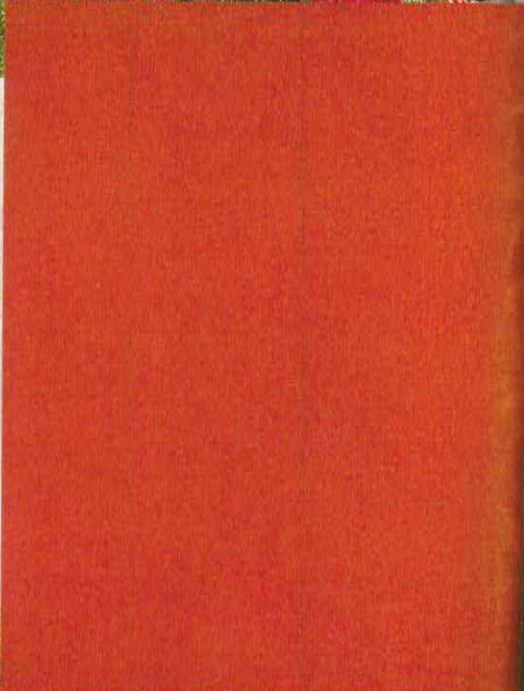
2. YARROW



5. STRAWBERRY TREE



9. GIANT DUTCHMAN'S PIPE



10. ECHEVERIA

STEVEN A. GUNTHER (1, 5, 6, 7, 9); HOLLY LEPERE (2, 3, 4, 8, 10, 12); MICHAEL WESCHLER/BOTANICA (11)

"An arid garden doesn't have to look dull. The palette of plants is wonderfully diverse"

-GARDEN DESIGNER MARGARET GRACE



3. KANGAROO PAW



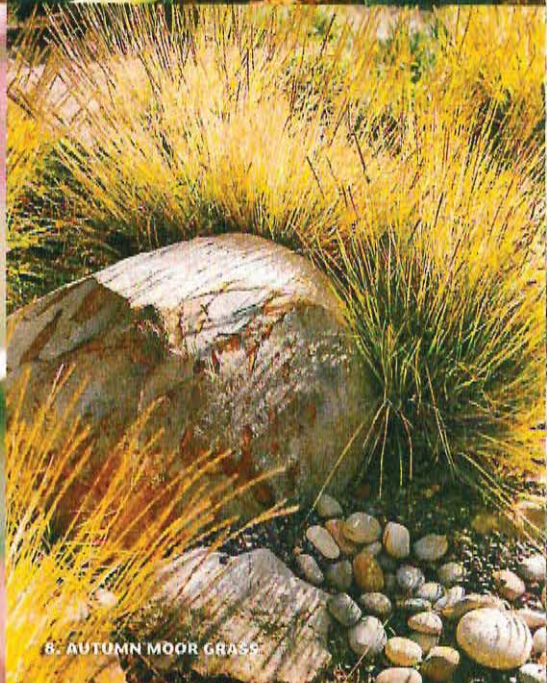
4. AGAVE



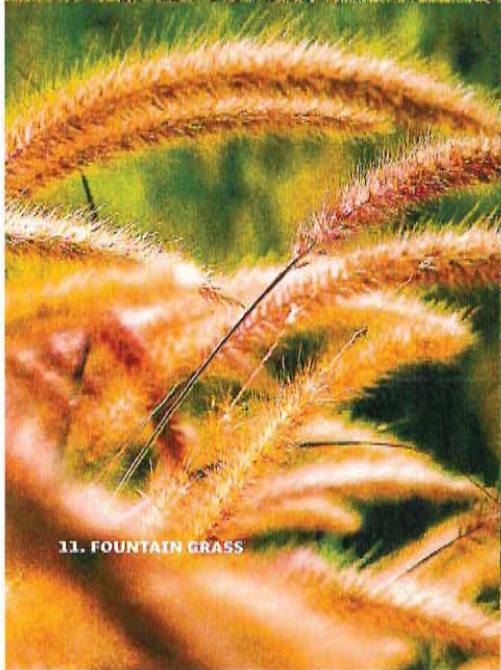
6. MOUNTAIN FLAX



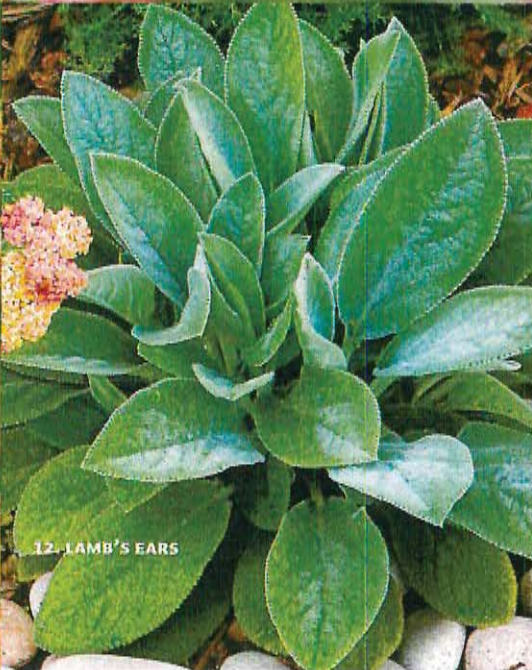
7. ECHINACEA



8. AUTUMN MOOR GRASS

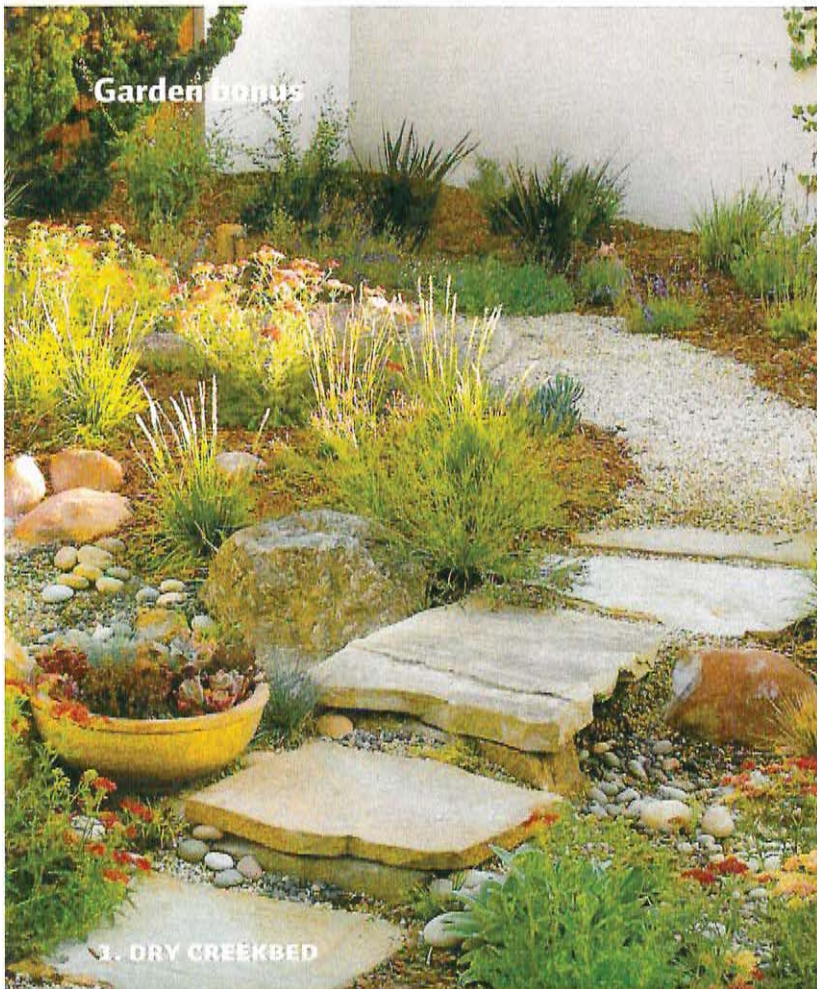


11. FOUNTAIN GRASS

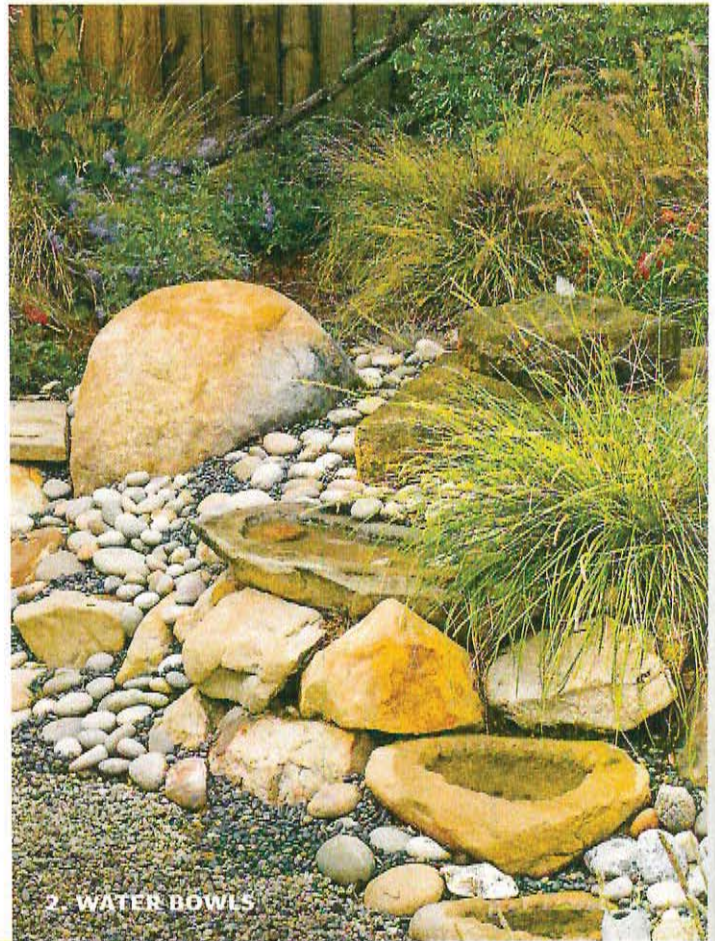


12. LAMB'S EARS

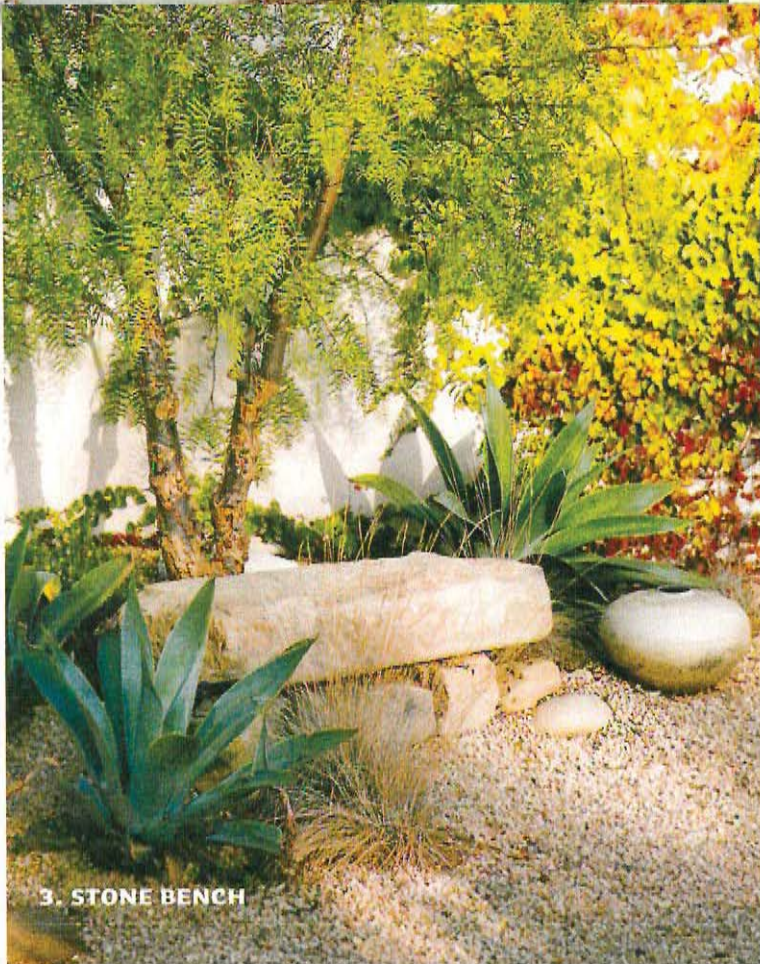




1. DRY CREEKBED



2. WATER BOWLS



3. STONE BENCH

Use of water and stone

Dry climates need water features even more than wet ones do. But just a trickle of water can create a cooling effect, and well-placed stone adds to the illusion.

1. DRY CREEKBED

A rock-strewn channel curves through the meadow and beneath a small stone bridge to harvest rainwater. Even when it's empty, its presence suggests water.

2. WATER BOWLS

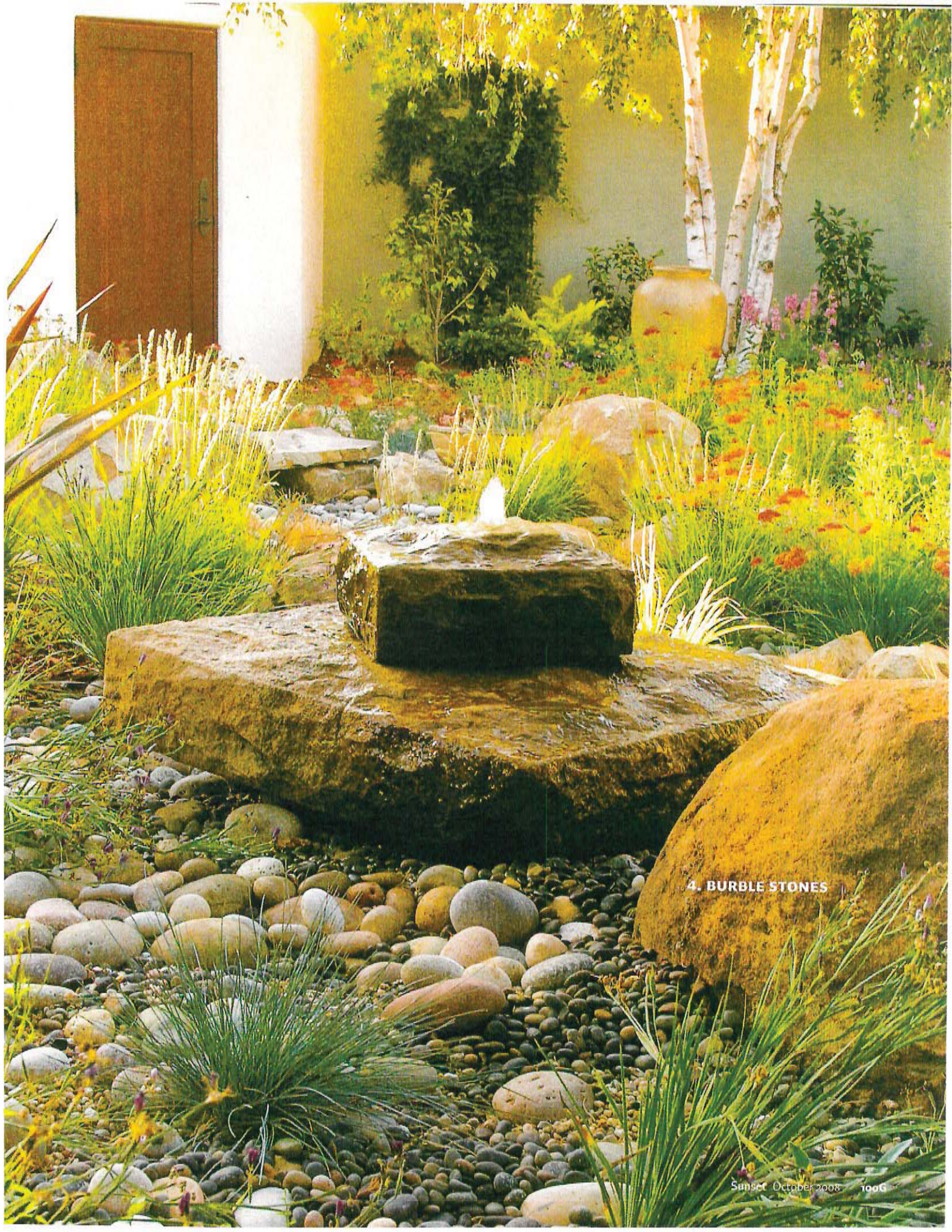
Shallow basins in sandstone rocks hold just enough water to look cool. Birds and butterflies love these scattered watering holes.

3. STONE BENCH

Flanked by a trio of agaves, a rough-hewn slab of recycled curbstone rests atop chunks of local sandstone, while a California pepper tree provides a bit of shade.

4. BURBLE STONES

Salvaged stone caps (from columns demolished on-site) form a simple recirculating fountain; their rectangular shapes contrast well with the round boulders nearby. The pump and reservoir are beneath the cobblestones.



4. BURBLE STONES

Garden banur

A weathered teak bench, tucked among grasses and echinaceas, provides the perfect view across the front yard "meadow."

