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DESIGN

A Yard With No Lawn But Plenty of

Thanks to these landscaping tips, a pair of water-conscious Angelenos decided to sl garden and rarely miss the demanding turf

By Catherine Romano

July 12, 2019 10:32 am ET

MANY OF US have considered opting out of the Great American Lawn competition, only to be dissuaded by the specter of Joni Mitchell’s forlorn “paved paradise”—a yard that resembles a parking lot more than Eden. For clients with a walled front yard in Los Angeles, local landscape designer Patricia Benner skirted that risk, creating a “dry garden” that requires little water, and dispenses with thirsty turf while still sustaining nerve-salving verdure.

She urged ivy to grow up some walls, and trained (or espaliered) fruit trees to grow flat against others. She introduced field-grown olive trees to form



LUSH HOUR In the Brentwood section of Los Angeles, landscape designer Patricia Benner created a defiantly verdant yard without any water-hogging lawngrass. JESSICA SAMPLE FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, STYLING BY MERISA LIBBEY

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umbrellas of silver green overhead. (In lawnless urban gardens, she pointed out, foliage on a wall or overhead similarly plays a big role.)

Ms. Benner used hardscape materials to define a welcoming, practical layout for the approximately 1,800-square-foot yard. In the fireside seating area, for example, she established a floor with poured-in-place concrete, edged it with a contrasting border of gray Mexican pebbles set in concrete, then surrounded all with pea gravel. “I wanted to create carpets for the major living spaces,” she said.

More foliage in an array of textures and hues further distracts from the absence of grassy turf. There's nothing about her scheme that couldn't be recreated outside California, Ms. Benner noted. You can find plants with coarse, medium and fine leaves as well as foliage ranging in color from chartreuse to bronze in every region of the U.S. So no matter where you hang your hoe, you can say goodbye to demanding lawn grass.

Climbing the Walls

For a "dry garden" in Los Angeles, area landscape designer Patricia Benner renounced water-hogging sod. The Boston ivy she planted along the stucco wall not only softened the space, "it brings to the vertical surface the green that's lacking in the ground plain." Also illustrated here is Ms. Benner's penchant for repeating plant materials at varying heights. To the left of the fireplace a jade shrub (brightened by sunlight) crouches, while on the fireplace's right, another jade bush sits in a tall planter. "I like to leapfrog species around the garden," she said. Plants repeat but not predictably.

A Staggered Path

A hopscotch of pavers leads from the main gate in the wall to the front door of the house. "The pattern repeats every 5 or 6 feet and draws you along," said Ms. Benner. This sense of "movement" contrasts with the static rectangles of concrete on which the "dining-" and "living-room" furniture sits. Just left of the gate opening, a germander sports tiny flowers of a pale blue that recurs in potted plants elsewhere in the garden. "You can have variety, but it's important to have elements that repeat the color, even if they're a different texture," said Ms. Benner. Another example: At various points in the garden, she strategically used lavender and a succulent called echeveria "Afterglow," with a similar pale purple shade.



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Party of Two

“Maybe it’s the East Coaster in me, but I always want dark green in the garden to make me feel cool,” said Ms. Benner, who grew up in New Jersey. Against the wall near the burbling koi pond, a laurel hedge stands in for the nonexistent lawn. One of three field-grown olive trees punctuates the end of this seating area. “They have gnarly, sculptural trunks,” said the designer, who noted that, in the eastern U.S., a “wonderful old apple tree” would serve. “This space has nice morning light,” she said, “and each day



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they call “the breakfast room.”

An Important Step

Risers clad in encaustic tiles, a feature found throughout the house, appear in the garden as well. The home’s Spanish roof tiles and its front entry’s stairs informed the use of terra cotta in the garden, both here as tiles and as free-standing pots. Originally (and recreated for this photo), elfin thyme separated the pavers. The thyme would fare better in climates with regular rain, said Ms. Benner, and the owners have since replaced the diminutive herb with more-practical pebbles.

Earthy Chandeliers

A lawnless yard can leave you feeling like you’re sitting on a driveway. Alleviate any risk of that with organic, homey decorations that you might



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e branches of olive trees like ceiling lights. Over time, nestled against the leaves, they have mellowed to a gray brown that complements the weathered cedar of the Smith & Hawken seats and tables that furnish the yard. Said Ms. Benner of the trees themselves, “The leaves work so well with the grays in the garden, and their gray-green color sets the tone at the eye level and above.”



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