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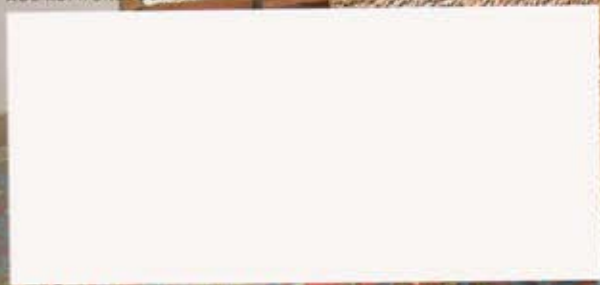
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John and Rita Emerson's two-year-old garden isn't like any other on the block. And they like it that way. There's no lawn to mow, no billowy shrubs to prune, few flowers to fuss over. "My wife and I don't have green thumbs," John confesses, "so the garden is perfect for us." Yet ample greenery softens the edges of their contemporary house on a small lot in Los Angeles. Plants are mostly tough and unthirsty, and they're used with restraint to create simple drama.

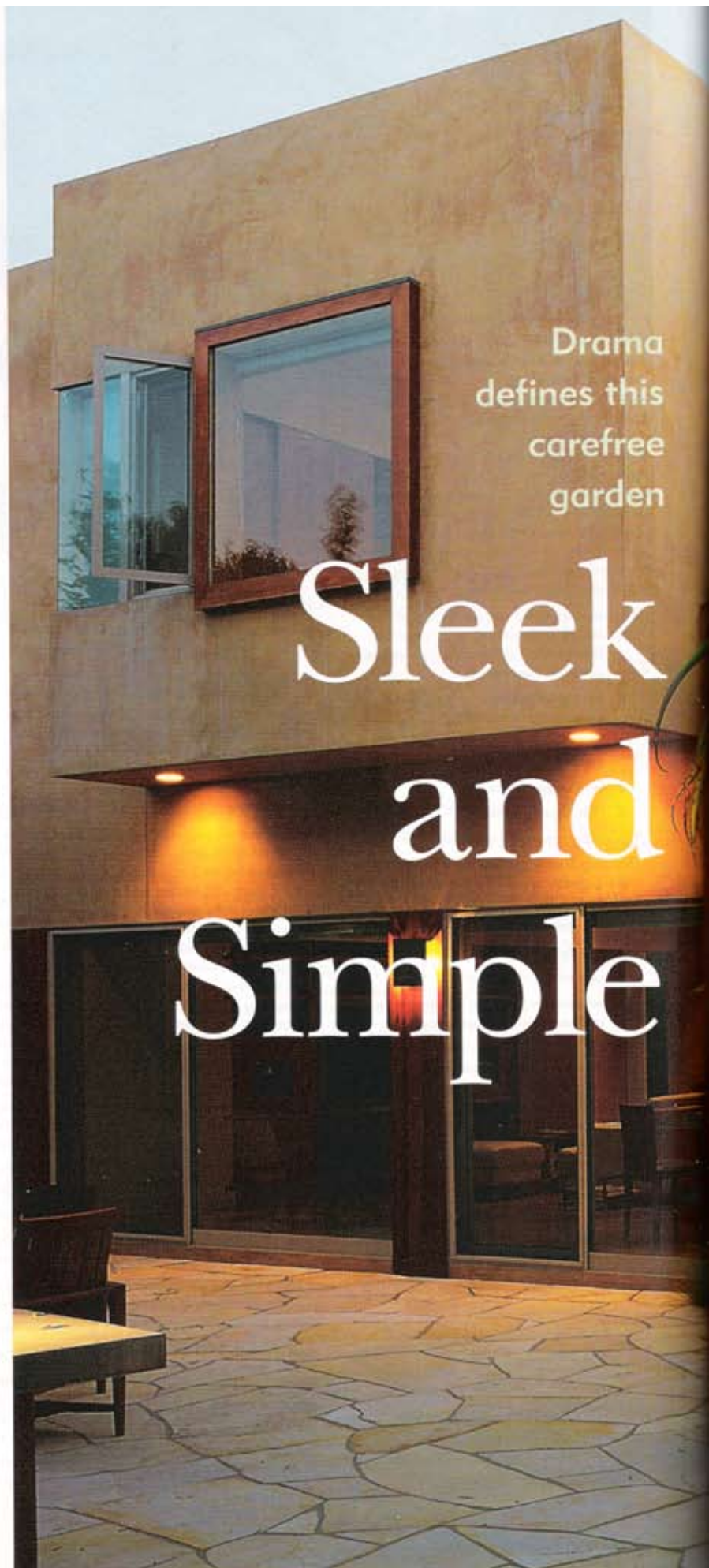
"A graphic designer might shape a garden like this," says R. Michael Schneider, the landscape architect who designed the garden. "It's an architectural garden; materials are plants, stone, water, and the play of light on hard surfaces. Yet it's a garden with soul and spirit," he adds.

While the plants featured in this garden grow best in mild climates, the design principles pictured here can be adapted throughout the West. In cold climates, you could substitute a trio of birches for the tree aloes and underplant them with blue fescue. In hot desert climates, you might use small, slender palms instead.

BY KATHLEEN N. BRENZEL

PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVEN GUNTHER

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Drama
defines this
carefree
garden

Sleek and Simple



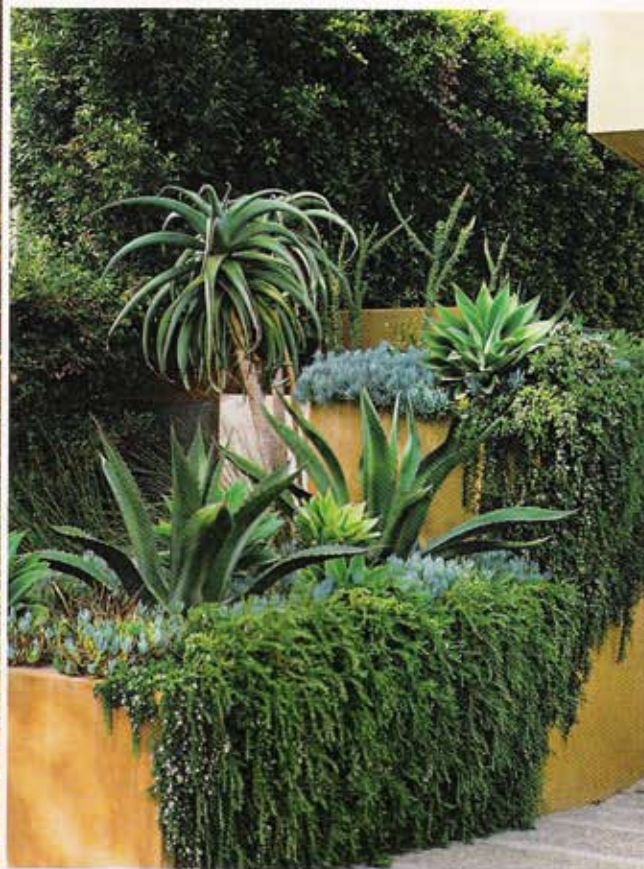
Keep lines clean

"Eliminate clutter and highlight the most important ideas," says landscape architect R. Michael Schneider. In the back patio, three tree aloes (*Aloe thraaskii*) cast silhouettes on house walls. Growing below them are *Phormium*, kangaroo paws, variegated *Miscanthus sinensis condensatus*, Mexican leather grass, and *Yushania maling*, a delicate clumping bamboo.

Blur the boundary

Planting pockets and large windows on the ground floor enhance the connection between indoors and outdoors. On the front deck, a mass of cape rush (*Chondropetalum tectorum*) makes a striking kinetic sculpture as it moves in the breeze above bluish Mexican beach pebbles. Viewed from indoors, it's also a safety barrier in front of the hard-to-see glass. The teak decking gets refinished twice a year with an oil stain.





Contrast shapes, texture

Plants with bold forms contrast with fine-leaved foliage in raised planters that step down to the sidewalk on both sides of the driveway. In the bed pictured here, two large, blue-green century plants (*Agave americana*), a spiny, sticklike ocotillo (*Fouquieria splendens*), and a tall tree aloe are sculptural focal points among smaller, soft green agaves (*A. attenuata*) and low-growing, cool blue *Senecio mandraliscae*. Rosemary 'Severn Sea' trails over the walls and covers itself in spring with sky-blue flowers.



Mix materials

Wood, pebbles, stone paving, water, and plants blend together to create a multi-textural passage. Just beyond the deck, staggered pavers of various widths give way to more uniform pavers laced together with strips of gray-green dymondia. Deep green horsetail (*Equisetum hyemale*) forms vertical hedges. Clumps of blue fescue (lower right) are edged with rosemary. Repeat the same materials throughout the garden, Schneider suggests, for a cohesive overall look.

Create surprises

"Bringing people straight to the house is a missed opportunity," says Schneider. Instead, slow the journey and reveal the garden gradually. Here, the entry steps up from the sidewalk to the first outdoor room, but the horse-tail hedge conceals part of the view beyond. Outside the hedge, you may hear bubbling water, but you can't see its source. Then, as you pass the hedge and approach the front door, the reflecting pool comes into view. Schneider calls this a "journey of sound and movement." Golden Mexican feather grass (*Nassella tenuissima*), clumps of blue fescue, and succulents edge the steps; dymondia spreads a gray-green carpet in the foreground. An olive tree canopies the bench.

LANDSCAPE DESIGN: R. Michael Schneider, Orange Street Studio, Los Angeles (323/874-3378)

DESIGN: Dion McCarthy, DesignARC, Los Angeles (310/204-8950)





Use bold accents

Agave 'Mediopicta Alba' is a living sculpture near the front entry. It grows in a stone bowl, whose charcoal color matches the matte-finished, steel-clad wall panel behind. Both the container and the panel add drama to a corner where walls of earth-toned stucco and paler shell stone meet the deck of warm-toned, honey brown teak. "The more you distill plantings, the more you get to the real character of a place," notes Schneider.



Build in some seating

A zigzag wall is capped with teak for seating in the backyard. "This isn't just a garden to look at but to be in," says the designer. Red-tipped Japanese blood grass fringes the seat's back edge. Low-growing Mexican feather grass and blue oat grass (*Helictotrichon sempervirens*), along with taller, variegated *Miscanthus sinensis condensatus* 'Cosmopolitan' and plum-colored *Phormium tenax* 'Rubrum' surround the shapely trunks of mature 'Manzanillo' olive trees, found at an old grove and hoisted into position by crane. ●