

A zigzagging hedge of bush germander (*Teucrium fruticans*) creates an edge for the small lawn and echoes the ridgeline of the surrounding Santa Monica Mountains.

**Water Wiser** On a hilltop above Los Angeles, an architect scrapped most of his lawn for an artful, climate-friendly garden.



A quick filler for the empty ground around a house, a lawn isn't always the best solution, especially in a dry climate. But four years ago, this ridgetop in Bel Air was engulfed in grass—almost 3,700 square feet of it. “It demanded so much water!” says the owner, an architect who bought the property for its glass-walled midcentury house and mountain and city views.

Not only did the environmental impact of his lawn disturb him, it wasn't even pretty. “I wanted a garden that changed with the seasons,” he recalls. The grass was static, and its bright green clashed with the subtler tones of the surrounding natural landscape. What's more, since his third-of-an-acre dropped off precipitously behind his home, it was unsettling to walk outside.

“The yard needed containment, security and a foreground to the mountains,” says Lisa Gimmy, a landscape architect based in Culver City and a longtime professional acquaintance of the owner. While he renovated the house, she developed a garden plan that reduced his turf-grass sea to one-sixth its original size. In the front yard, she added privacy from the street by planting ironbark and arbutus trees, a westringia hedge and a mix of tall-growing ornamental grasses. In the back, she hedged the scrap of surviving lawn—retained as entertaining space—with a zigzag of bush germander, a smoke-blue shrub that contrasts with the mixed greens and relates to the blue of the sky. Nearby, she planted succulents, and beside the house, where the ground falls away toward a neighbor's lot, she combined South African and Australian plants—proteas, acacias, leucadendrons.

All, says Gimmy, are drought-tolerant and suited to the Zone 10 climate. They also harmonize visually. “In plants adapted to the same conditions,” she explains, “you see similar characteristics—for example, soft greens and a frosty coating to the leaves for protection against the sun.”

The garden's color palette blends oranges and golds—in the blooms of aloes and kangaroo paws, in the fleshy leaves of echeverias—with the cool silvers of other succulents, tall grasses and shrubs. Many of the plants—agaves, aeoniums, senecio—are highly sculptural, which connects them to the inside of the house. “I collect art,” the owner says, “and I wanted the garden to read as part of the collection as your eye moves from the indoors out.”

Just as critical to him was carrying the strong geometry of his T-shaped house into the landscape, creating courtyards, strolling paths and patios for parties. Gimmy linked these new spaces with warm-toned Palm Springs gravel—embedded in terrace pavers, loose in the seams of walks and as topdressing for planting beds.

The planting is colorful, low-maintenance and often surprising (flowering unexpectedly throughout the year). Only the bush germander needs trimming, three times annually; the grasses require a single cutback in late winter. The owner mows his small lawn himself, with an old-fashioned, nonpolluting push mower. And though his garden pleasures have increased exponentially, reducing the turf has trimmed his water bill by 40 percent. ☘

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*Clockwise from top left: Pink-tinged echeverias, surrounded by Palm Springs gravel, send up bloom spikes in a succulent bed. Aloe striata flowers among more Echeveria 'Afterglow' along a walk as the city shines in the distance. A close look at Aeonium arboreum reveals its tight, flowerlike structure. Designer Gimmy shored up the property's slope with retaining walls before planting her angled bush germander hedge, a woolly lawn border with a modernist bent; potted succulents add architectural focal points to the adjoining path. Aloe speciosa, near the fire pit, sends up conelike inflorescences that attract hummingbirds when they open. Rustling ornamental grasses and a sheltering eucalyptus tree soften the strict lines of the house. Leucadendron 'Safari Sunset' lifts burnished leaves toward the light. Red kangaroo paws, century plants, senecio and blue fescue team up in a front-garden bed. Opposite: A decomposed granite path curves between an ethereal gold sedge (Carex buchananii) and a specimen succulent (Agave salmiana) in a sea of blue fescue. Ironbark eucalyptus trees frame the mountain view.*