

High & Dry

After Restructuring for Erosion Control, a 1970s-Era Landscape Boasts a New Contemporary Look

BY CATHY CROMELL ■ PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL WOODALL



Along the patio railing of this Phoenix home, Chad Robert added slipper flower (*Pedilanthus macrocarpus*) in pots for a strong architectural presence and coral fountain (*Russelia equisetiformis*) to soften the fence and hardscape lines. “We chose the pots’ color and finish to blend with surrounding elements and plants that wouldn’t block the incredible views,” he says.

WHILE HOUSE-HUNTING in 2010, Sharon Landis found a place with all the elements she had been seeking: Contemporary style, a pool-free yard, terrific views, nearby hiking trails and proximity to Phoenix’s urban center. Although the 1970s-era residence had “good bones,” both the house and the landscape needed to be updated.

Landis asked landscape architect Chad Robert, a Phoenix Home & Garden Master of the Southwest, to create a colorful, low-water-use landscape to blend with her home’s architecture.

“Chad jokes that I’m the only client he’s ever worked with who wanted to renovate the outside before the inside, but this landscape had so much potential that I wanted to get plants installed and growing,” she recalls.

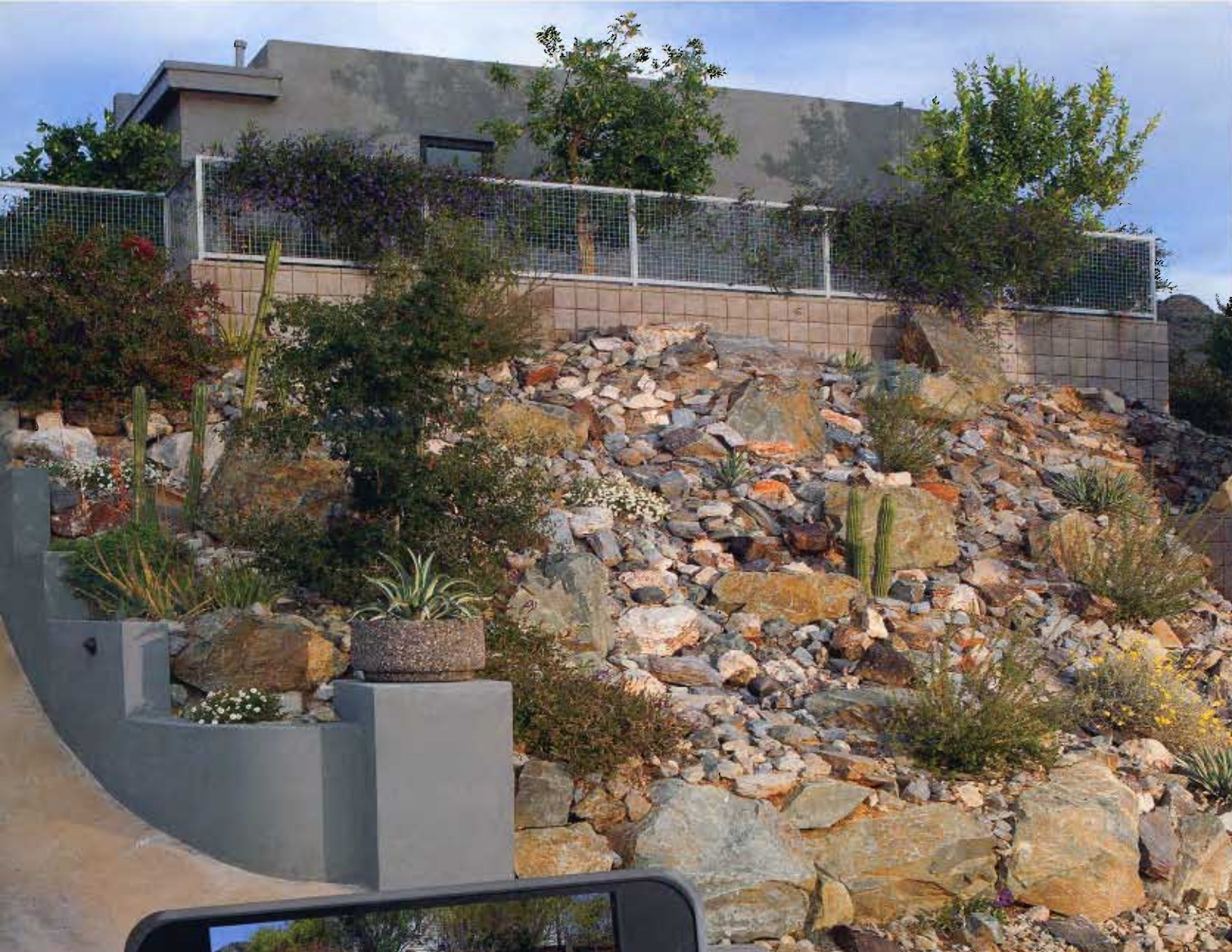
The house perches on a relatively small, flat footprint atop a hill, with steep slopes that formerly contained a hodgepodge of plants and outmoded railroad ties stacked as retaining walls. “The ties were falling apart, and there was no real plan to the existing landscape,” Landis describes.

The hillside required upgraded erosion control, but installing new retaining walls was problematic because of code changes enacted after the original construction. Robert’s solution was to embed boulders in the hill to aid soil retention, create planting pockets and blend with the natural surroundings. “Boulders were selected to match the color of the existing rock,” he notes.

During the almost three-month project, crews removed loads of plant material, including dried fountain grass (*Pennisetum setaceum*) covering the southern slope. “Fountain grass is highly

invasive and a fire hazard when it dries out,” Robert cautions. Fire travels swiftly up slopes, especially on windy days, so it was essential to clean out the scrub before replanting.

As a supporter of Arizona Opera, Landis—herself a former opera singer—frequently holds gatherings for the company at her home. “The plants and views from the patio always draw people outside,” she reports. “Chad was able to artfully maximize the property’s small amount of flat space to enhance entertaining. I’m very, very happy with the results.”



Before



THE SCOOP

BIGGEST CHALLENGE: Restructuring the steep hill.

BIGGEST SPLURGE: Also the hill. "Chad was very sensitive to controlling costs throughout the project, but stabilizing the hill was a huge undertaking, requiring considerable manual labor," says homeowner Sharon Landis.

BIGGEST DISCOVERY: A large flat sheet of metal covering a hole in the hillside, which came to light during cleanup. The homeowner practices sustainability and wanted to repurpose the metal. "Because it had cutouts that resemble a face (above), Chad suggested that we paint it a bright color and display it upright as sculpture," Landis explains.

Opposite: New vegetation on the restored hillside includes agave, Chihuahuan sage, columnar cacti and flowering groundcovers. At the top of the hill, Chad Robert built a retaining wall topped with welded wire-mesh fencing. "The fencing also acts as a trellis, allowing vines planted at its base to weave in and out," he explains. The driveway wall was stuccoed and painted to match the house.

Top right: The homeowner chose to retain mature bougainvilleas growing in a narrow bed along the patio's edge, even though they require regular pruning to stay manageable and not block views. "Bougainvilleas are so resilient and colorful that I didn't want to let them go," says Sharon Landis. "I come from a long line of gardeners who like to putter, so I enjoy the time I spend trimming."

Bottom right: A steppingstone walk leads to the front of the house. "The path's simple grid complements the block wall and fencing," notes the landscape architect. Blue euphorbia and clusters of Parry's agave draw the eye toward the citrus tree. On the right, lilac vine (*Hardenbergia violacea*) fills the area with color and fragrance from late winter to early spring.

See Sources.

