

ABROAD

# SPANISH LESSONS

Tour three Mediterranean landscapes that show the best of waterwise design.

Designer Fernando Martos brought year-round appeal to this garden in El Cesar, Spain, by planting the pool area with red escallonia and 'Munstead' lavender for structure and giant feather grass for movement and light.

# SPAIN

has taught the world about gardening for centuries. There's no better model for minimal water use in a semiarid climate than the Alhambra's gardens, which date back to the 13th century.

We can still learn from Spanish gardens, as you'll see in the three lush, contemporary examples that follow. These gardens are all in a Mediterranean region on Spain's central plateau—well away from the coast—at elevations close to 2,000 feet or higher. Rainfall here ranges from 14 to 20 inches a year, summer temperatures frequently get into the 90s and beyond, and winters can dip into the 20s.

The gardens' plant palettes extend far beyond Mediterranean staples such as rosemary and lavender. There are even plants for colder climates that can be used if adequate drainage is provided—these include Jerusalem sage, lamb's ear, allium, iris, English yew, Italian cypress, and many others. Also take note of the jewel-box courtyards, native stone walls, shade structures, and other features that make outdoor living comfortable wherever you live.

BY JANET LOUGHREY  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CLAIRE TAKACS



## EVERGREEN RETREAT

- Madrid Province
- Elevation: 3,800 feet
- Average precipitation: 20 inches per year
- Temperatures: Highs in the 90s, lows in the 20s



## HILLTOP HACIENDA

- Guadalajara Province
- Elevation: 2,000 feet
- Average precipitation: 16 inches per year
- Temperatures: Highs in the 100s, lows in the 20s



## COURTYARD OF COLOR

- Toledo Province
- Elevation: 2,300 feet
- Average precipitation: 14 inches per year
- Temperatures: Highs in the 100s, lows in the 20s



7 GUADALAJARA PROVINCE

# HILLTOP HACIENDA

The pastoral setting of El Casar, a small municipality located in the province of Guadalajara, is composed of rolling prairielike grasslands punctuated with native groves of holm oak. Summer high temperatures can climb to more than 100 degrees Fahrenheit, while winter temperatures can plunge into the 20s. Typical annual rainfall is just 16 inches, with most precipitation falling in winter, spring, and fall, along with the occasional winter snowfall. A private hilltop garden located here in rugged terrain at nearly 2,000 feet in elevation is windy and exposed, with poor soil that consists

of a thin layer of topsoil over rocky clay. “The extreme heat and wind presented the biggest challenge, as plants dry out very quickly, so we had to work with varieties that were exceptionally reliable and have a low water requirement,” says Fernando Martos, who designed and built the garden.

Martos amended the soil in the 115- by 345-foot garden area with a 2-inch layer of sand and organic matter to improve drainage and add nutrients. Drifts of evergreen lavender, shrubby germander, and rockrose provide the structural backbone and year-round interest. By late spring, perennial salvias, bearded iris, Jerusalem sage, Jupiter’s beard, and tall stands of purple

A small lawn off the veranda is a mix of ‘Pixie’ tall fescue and zoysia grasses, which are heat- and drought-tolerant. The gravel pathway is a transition between the home and native landscape beyond. Silvery lamb’s ear, catmint, and purple ‘May Night’ salvia spill into the gravel pathway and soften the edges.

allium explode in a symphony of intense color. In the late summer and into fall, the landscape relaxes in the sublime glow of the waning sun, featuring the periwinkle spikes of Russian sage, rusty ‘Autumn Joy’ sedum, and golden tufts of Mexican feather grass, ‘Karl Foerster’ feather reed grass, and giant feather grass. The result, reminiscent of Dutch garden designer Piet Oudolf’s exuberant naturalistic landscapes, is a feast for the eyes and soul.

Though the intent was to create an informal, untamed look to complement the prairielike surroundings, there is also a disciplined component. Shrubs such as rockrose and shrubby germander are

pruned three times a year to create dense, sculptural mounds that mimic the formal boxwood hedging characteristic of English landscapes. “Even though our climate is far less forgiving, I wanted to bring the richness and seasonal interest of English gardens into my design,” Martos says.

Regular pruning of spent flowers allows perennials such as Russian sage, lavender, and salvias to experience repeat blooms while extending their life spans. The garden is watered with drip irrigation weekly in summer, just enough to keep plants healthy and lush. A patch of grass adjacent to the veranda, a nod to formal English lawns, is planted with drought-tolerant

varieties of fescue and zoysia.

“Because of recent environmental changes, combined with the increased strain on natural resources, traditional pleasure gardens—which historically have little regard for the resources they use—are a thing of the past,” Martos says. “Sustainability represents the present and future of garden design, with a return to using indigenous and well-adapted plants from other regions of the world to create gardens that benefit the people who live in them, as well as wildlife and the greater environment. By modeling landscapes after native ecosystems, we are acting as responsible stewards of the land.”

**Above, left:** Designer Fernando Martos prefers newer hybrids of bearded iris such as ‘Syncopation’, which has exceptionally long stems and a longer bloom time than older varieties. The foliage creates spiky exclamation points of structure throughout the landscape, while the tawny tones of rich gold and deep burgundy complement nearby Mexican feather grass, catmint, and salvias. **Above, middle:** ‘May Night’ salvia is a prolific and long-flowering variety that blooms in early summer and again in fall when spent flowers are cut back. It is also tolerant of heavy clay soils. Martos values this selection for its benefit to bees and other pollinating insects. **Above, right:** Every garden needs a place to escape from the sun, especially in a Mediterranean garden such as this. Seating and resting areas are positioned to take advantage of shade and cooling breezes, with inspiring views to rejuvenate the soul.