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GARDENS

ILLUSTRATED

Brilliant PLANTING

*for sparkling
summer displays*

9
BEST
OUTDOOR
KITCHENS

All the
buzz

giving wild
bees a home

EXPERT'S CHOICE
magical
hollyhocks

DESIGN
DETAIL

how best to give an old
garden fresh purpose

Middle ground

For this garden in central Spain, Fernando Martos has used planting that is absolutely of its place, with year-round good looks, and a reduced need for water – essential for this harsh climate

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IN BRIEF

What A reduced-irrigation garden using mostly Mediterranean region native species.

Where Central Spain.

Size 600 square metres.

Soil Free-draining, granite-based soil mixed with sand.

Climate Mediterranean steppe, with a wide temperature range. Cold winters and hot, dry summers.

Hardiness zone USDA 8.

Designer Fernando Martos used the grasses *Sesleria* 'Greenlee' and *Stipa gigantea* to knit together a mix of different shapes and textures from mainly evergreen shrubs, including *Euphorbia seguieriana* subsp. *niciiana*, *Stachys byzantina* and *Philomoides tuberosa*.



There's nothing especially unusual about the sight of old stone walls, made of rough granite, in the countryside of central Spain. But hidden behind the stone walls surrounding this private house, near Toledo, south of Madrid, is something that really is unusual in this part of Spain: a garden.

And not just any garden. There are no bright colours, no lawn and none of the obvious status-symbol irrigation seen all too often in dry-climate regions. Instead this is a garden that seems to concentrate the best of its surroundings into one moderately small space. The rounded shapes of many of the plants echo the grey forms of the holm oaks (*Quercus ilex*) that dominate the surrounding hills. There are grasses, similar to those growing in the wild and lots of different textures. These plants sit happily alongside big stones, boulders really, the shapes of which mirror many of the rounded plants. This is clearly a new model of gardening, and one that is very much of its place.

"The clients asked for something very natural," says the garden's designer Fernando Martos. "They wanted it to look as though it had been here for ever." To this end Fernando has used the tough, low-growing grass, *Sesleria* 'Greenlee', as a matrix

plant. These are plants that are relatively low-profile, and not ecologically or visually assertive, but strong enough to dominate a ground layer. They help reduce the danger of weed infiltration, filling in the gaps between other plants and, very often, helping highlight their special qualities – of colour or form. In this garden, the *Sesleria* makes up around half of the total planting, and this particular cultivar is relatively drought tolerant, has a good colour and according to Fernando grows better than the well-known *Sesleria autumnalis* popularised by the Dutch designer Piet Oudolf.

Among the *Sesleria* are plants that tend to form rounded shapes, and with habits that ensure there will be a certain amount of meshing together over time, including *Salvia officinalis* 'Berggarten', a superior form of the culinary sage that makes a good foliage plant. Many plants are Mediterranean natives, their hummocky shapes emphasised by being lightly pruned once or twice a year. A 5cm mulch of local limestone chips forms a pathways between the areas of planting, and is partly extended in-between the plants, its neutral tones offer a contrast to – and also help to highlight – the grey-green of the plants.

On the whole, this garden's look is an example of the aesthetic widely promoted by the French nurseryman, Olivier Filippi. But there is another

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Above Terracotta pots, filled with neatly clipped wild olive (*Olea europaea* subsp. *europaea* var. *sylvestris*) and *Lavandula dentata*, add a more formal touch to the cobbled courtyard. Behind, deep raised beds hold three, multi-stem *Amelanchier alnifolia* underplanted with a loose mix of planting that features the trailing rosemary *Salvia rosmarinus* 'Rampant Boule' spilling over the edge.

Right Mexican fleabane *Erigeron karvinskianus* trails down from upper planters, adding to the feel that this garden has been here for years. Below, the deep-raised beds are filled with an exuberant mix of textures and colours, including *Salvia* 'African Sky' and *Salvia rosmarinus* 'Rampant Boule' – both of which make effective groundcover plants with aromatic foliage and attractive flowers.

This is a garden that seems to concentrate the best of its surroundings into one moderately small space



An aerial photograph of a white, single-story house with a red-tiled roof, nestled in a hilly landscape covered in dense green oak trees. In the foreground, a dry garden with a light-colored gravel path and several circular planting beds is visible. The garden is bordered by a low stone wall. The background shows more of the oak-covered hills under a clear sky.

Right plant, right soil

"My experience with Mediterranean region planting is that you need a poor soil and good drainage," says designer Fernando Martos. That poor soil might help plants to thrive may sound surprising to some, but basically it is about slowing down plant growth.

Most species that thrive in dry summer climates also naturally grow on lean soils. Many are also relatively short-lived, and will 'burn out' rapidly in moist and fertile ground – something northern European gardeners may well have discovered when a cistus or ceanothus grows rapidly for a few years and then suddenly dies.

It can be more difficult to create a dry-climate garden on a rich loam because the natural flora of a loam soil is generally herbaceous and would die back in the summer drought. In contrast, plants that grow naturally in shallow, rocky soil are evergreen and so they at least maintain their basic appearance through the summer. Some dry-climate species are also prone to fungal diseases if watered during hot weather.

In this garden, Fernando has combined the existing soil with sand in a 50/50 mix. This helps to open it up and reduce its fertility, a measure that will help to ensure longevity of plants and promote plant health.

The holm oak covered hills surrounding the garden are echoed in both the shapes of many of the plant species used and by the shapes of the planting beds – and indeed by that of the whole walled area. On the other side of the wall in the foreground is Fernando's wildflower meadow – already showing the impact of the hot, dry summer.



An emerging Mediterranean style uses more grasses and herbaceous plants to create a slightly wilder and looser style

► emerging Mediterranean regional style that uses more grasses and herbaceous plants to create a more raggedy, slightly wilder and looser style.

There is a nod to that here, with taller grasses that do a good job of catching the light with their flower- and seedheads. *Stipa gigantea*, surely one of the best of all ornamental grasses (and native to this area), is a feature. It is a wonderful species for adding height, but without bulk or anything other than a faint veil to sight lines, and can be magically illuminated by low sunlight at the end of the day. As one of the most distinctive plants of upland Spain and Portugal, its presence in the garden reinforces the link between the design and the locality.

This style is less drought-tolerant gardening and more low-water-requirement gardening. It addresses the desire of many who, although acutely aware of the chronic shortage of water in this part of the world, are looking for a garden that steers a middle course – eliminating the lawn and thirsty annuals, but still full of life in midsummer.

Even locally native plants – as many of these are – go into a ‘drought dormancy’ in summer, dropping leaves, shrivelling, going brown, and obviously withdrawing themselves to minimise the use of scarce water. This may help them to survive, but it is not especially attractive. Gardens that use dry-habitat plants but keep them looking fresh with minimal watering is an obvious

solution. “Nobody wants a dry garden,” says Fernando. “But we need to minimise irrigation.”

In this garden, for example, Fernando irrigates once a week, from July to mid-September – “Around 12 times a year in total,” he says. This ensures plants look alive but without encouraging too much growth. But beyond the garden wall he has created two areas where established plants have to rely solely on rainfall.

One is a meadow area made up of native species, sown with seed from Semilla Silvestres, a specialist in seed mixes of Iberian natives. “It can be cut after flowering and then in summer when it’s dry, it’s a place for children to play,” says Fernando.

In the other he’s planted hundreds of native shrubs. “We planted very small,” he says. “Not watered from the second year, they produce fruit for wildlife, which is important for me.” With the exception of *Pistacia terebinthus*, the shrubs – *Crataegus monogyna*, *Prunus spinosa*, *Viburnum lantana* and *Rosa canina* – are also native to the UK.

Gardens like this may be novel here, but in many ways they have more authenticity than wastefully irrigated pastiches of those of other climates. They are more truly of their place. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Find out more about Fernando’s work at fernandomartos.com/en

Above In the slightly shaded area close to the dining terrace, Fernando has created a loose natural look with a mix of mainly evergreen shrubs, including *Phillyrea angustifolia* and *Cistus salviifolius*, and the trailing, aromatic rosemary, *Salvia rosmarinus* ‘Rampant Boule’, against the backdrop of a climbing white rose. Among all this dark-green foliage *Phlomis italica* adds a fine silver-grey splash. It’s a genus that includes some of the very best silver-leaved plants for dry climates.



8 KEY PLANTS

- 1 *Stipa gigantea*** An evergreen grass that forms a tight clump. Its flowerheads and seedheads rise in airy panicles, which look fabulous when backlit. Good for cold, dry climates. Long-lived and atmospheric, it needs full sun. 2.5m x 1.2m. AGM*. RHS H4, USDA 5a-9b¹.
- 2 *Euphorbia seguieriana* subsp. *niciana*** A handsome spurge, with blue-green foliage and contrasting lime-green flowers. Drought tolerant, it offers a long season of interest in full sun. 50cm x 50cm. RHS H5, USDA 6a-10b.
- 3 *Stachys byzantina*** An attractive, low-growing perennial with furry, silver leaves. Can be used as groundcover in dry summer climates. Tolerant of thin soils and needs full sun. 20cm x 45cm. RHS H7, USDA 4a-9b.
- 4 *Salvia rosmarinus* ‘Rampant Boule’** A form of rosemary that makes a small mound with pendent outer branches – making it useful for spilling over a wall. Needs sun and is drought tolerant. 20cm x 60cm. RHS H4, USDA 8a-10b.
- 5 *Convolvulus sabatius*** A low-growing plant with trailing stems but not spreading. It has a long, summer-flowering period, and is good in stony soil and sun. 20cm x 50cm. AGM. RHS H3, USDA 8b-11.
- 6 *Achillea umbellata*** One of many *Achillea* species that can be used as a groundcover or a lawn alternative for areas that are rarely walked on. Needs sun and dry soils. 20cm x 30cm. RHS H4.
- 7 *Ceratostigma willmottianum*** Small, deciduous shrub, which is usually treated as a herbaceous perennial. It has a long flowering period from summer to autumn, and offers vivid, dark-red autumn colour. Can cope with sun or light shade, and has a spreading habit. 1m x 1.5m. AGM. RHS H4.
- 8 *Salvia forsteri*** A little-known salvia that is sprawling but low growing. Flowers from late summer to autumn. Not especially drought tolerant. 25cm.

*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society.
¹Hardiness ratings given where available.