

GARDEN



Photographs by CHRISTINE COTTER Los Angeles Times

WATER EFFICIENT: Nine-year-old Ethan Hall plays with golden retriever Ozzy on the artificial grass in the backyard of his home in Laguna Niguel. His parents, landscape designers Annemarie and Matthew Hall, use their personal garden and yard to experiment with sustainable, budget-conscious, modern designs. Next to the house: horse troughs as planters.

Testing, testing ...

EMILY YOUNG

When they're at work, landscape designers Annemarie and Matthew Hall are the experts, dispensing advice on how to save water, choose appropriate plants and maximize every square inch. But when they're at home in Laguna Niguel, the Halls are pretty much like the rest of us — that is, stuck with lousy soil, pestered by snails and always on the lookout for smarter, more affordable ways to maintain an attractive, functional garden.

"Annemarie and I talk about things like sustainability issues all the time," says Matthew, design director at the landscape architecture firm EPT Design in Irvine. "We feel we could practice more of what we're preaching. Our home garden is putting our money where our mouth is."

The Halls' personal landscape doubles as a professional laboratory, a place to test the ideas they suggest to clients. It's a whimsical mix of ornamental and edible plants and eye-grabbing paint and furniture.

"Everything's more fun and more playful now," says Annemarie, who runs her eponymous solo practice from home (ahalldesign@cox.net). "It's all about color and comfort."

The Halls bought their '70s ranch house in 1995 and shortly thereafter redesigned the garden to complement their Mediterranean-style interiors. Amid lavender and rosemary in the frontyard, they added a concrete fountain painted white and planted citrus in terra cotta pots. In the backyard, they framed their sweeping view of Saddleback Mountain with more lavender and sage, and they flanked the house with ferns planted in pots instead of the heavy clay earth.

The concrete dining patio bisecting the lawn was poured, scored and stained as an economical alternative to stone. A fire pit was notched out of the concrete, and for lighting, two wood towers were salvaged from a client's project, then wired and placed on a low concrete wall at the edge of the property.

"We feel like such scavengers," Matthew says, "but it would have been a shame to throw the towers away."

That initial garden plan lasted about six years. Eventually the Halls developed a taste for contemporary design that coincided with several plants reaching the end of their life span and key areas needing renovation. It was time to tinker.

In the front, where the Mediterranean choices were dying or overgrown, the Halls switched to agaves, senecio and other low-maintenance, easy-to-propagate succulents with shallower roots and meager water requirements.

For a more informal look, the front flagstone path was converted to concrete pavers (repurposed wall caps from yet another job) set in pea gravel. The little round stones rolled around too much, so they were replaced with crushed gravel, which is rougher on bare feet but stays put better. To in-

fuse the entrance with lively color, yellow chairs were placed under the existing magnolia tree, the fountain was painted cobalt blue and the terra cotta pots were painted red.

Out back, artificial turf replaced a lawn that had been difficult to maintain with the Halls' rambunctious son, Ethan, now 9, and golden retriever, Ozzy. The couple kept the sprinklers so that they could rinse the fake grass occasionally.

"We said we'd never do artificial turf," Annemarie says, "but better products are coming out all the time."

The Mediterranean plants framing the view made way for more succulents and lyme grass, and the Halls junked the potted ferns for dwarf philodendron in galvanized aluminum horse troughs that they found online for \$150 each.

A small art studio for Annemarie was conceived as a kind of garden folly. The Halls painted the structure and the light towers blue and yellow. The same cheerful color scheme was applied to a gas fireplace to tie the disparate elements together.

Fireside seating, arranged on crushed gravel that banished the rest of the lawn, consists of butterfly chairs with washable covers and eucalyptus stumps that cost \$10 apiece at a firewood yard. The dining patio received a face-lift as well, with an earth-toned woven ensemble disappearing in favor of bright orange Verner Pantan chairs around a redwood-topped table.

"The trees are messy," Matthew says. "I wasn't going to put a \$5,000 chaise under them."

In the side garden, where the Halls were previously hampered by less-than-optimal native soil, they transplanted hybrid tea and floribunda rose bushes, fruit trees and vegetables to additional horse troughs and 30-inch lengths of corrugated steel culvert pipe. With improved soil and individual drip emitters, the plants are thriving again.

"Ethan doesn't garden much, but he plants his own potatoes and strawberries," Annemarie says. "It's our hope that he appreciates how things make it to the table as our food."

Over the summer, the Halls expanded their suburban farm by removing the thirsty front lawn and installing two large raised vegetable beds made of long-wearing redwood planks. They increased the size of their harvest and even enjoyed a few ears of the corn from stalks that screened the living room window. Most recently, the Halls adopted three Leghorn chickens, treating them to a custom coop in exchange for fresh eggs. And so it goes as the designers continue to experiment and adapt, blurring the line between playground and proving ground.

"Matt and I usually work on half-a-million-dollar to million-dollar jobs," Annemarie says. "But good design doesn't have to be expensive. It can be budget-conscious and just as creative."

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GROWING, LIVING AREAS: Raised vegetables beds and bright pots replaced lawn in the frontyard, top. The dining area, above, is inviting in the backyard. Below, pipe lengths are planters in the side yard.



The bits and pieces used

The Halls called upon unusual products and materials to redesign the garden. Their sources:

Galvanized aluminum horse troughs came from WW Feed & Supply, 26120 Cordoba Drive, Hemet; (951) 926-4466.

Corrugated steel culvert pipe came from Pacific Corrugated Pipe Co., 13680 Slover Ave., Fontana; (800) 338-5858, www.pcpip.com.

Custom chicken coop was made by Coops by Keith, 13355 5th Place, Yucaipa; (909) 795-0678, chickenlady909@yahoo.com.

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