



# SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

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## Life

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### Painted Desert Artistic garden created from nature's palette

By LINDA SULLIVAN BAITY, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT  
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When used as an adjective, the word "succulent" means rich in desirable qualities and affording mental nourishment. As a noun, the word refers to a broad category of plants that have in common the ability to store water in their characteristically fleshy leaves and stems, which is why they tend to thrive in low-water environments such as ours. But guess what? Succulents also happen to be rich in desirable qualities and afford vast quantities of mental nourishment, especially to those who are lucky enough to have them in their gardens.

Master Gardener Deana Rae McMillion is unabashedly obsessed with succulents. She's attracted to their sculptural shapes, striking textures and surprisingly vibrant colors. Drawing heavily upon her well-honed artist's eye and a solid base of horticultural knowledge, she has managed to paint a picture-perfect desertscape with a natural palette of components typically associated with dusty and desolate terrain. But looking at the dramatic landscape as it now appears gives no hint of what came before.

As soon as Ms. McMillion and her husband moved into their house in the Heath Ranch neighborhood of Carpinteria in 2011, her first mission was to get rid of the lawn. "Grass was everywhere," she remembers, "except for one crab apple tree and a few clumps of daylilies and agapanthus. I knew I wanted it all gone, but I wasn't sure how to begin. The Master Gardener program taught me everything I needed to know and gave me the confidence to believe that I could tackle the job myself. So that's what I did!"

Ms. McMillion has succeeded in transforming the most ordinary of suburban lots into a stunning visual oasis using primarily succulents, cactuses and rocks.

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Carpinteria resident Deana Rae McMillion's front yard today is a garden artist's magnum opus.

LINDA SULLIVAN BAITY PHOTO



Deana Rae McMillion, Carpinteria

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Her design delights the senses and invites visitors to wander the paths, to examine the plants up close, and to enjoy the vignettes and hidden treasures at every turn. Thorns and prickles notwithstanding, her succulent garden is a welcoming place to be. (For a step-by-step description of her incredible front yard makeover, visit [deanaraedesigns.blogspot.com](http://deanaraedesigns.blogspot.com).)

The indisputable focal point of the landscape is a gigantic blue agave named Fred that Ms. McMillion planted as a test.

"I've always wanted an agave, and I know they can get huge, so I gave it plenty of room to grow, knowing that I could replace it if necessary."

Although not botanically classified as a cactus, this species of agave sports fearsome spikes at the tip of each leaf, which Ms. McMillion clips off so that she can safely harvest the baby agave "pups" that sprout from the base.

Vying for attention with Fred is his buddy Wilma, the candelabra cactus towering beside him. They make a formidable couple since Wilma has spines of her own. But? because her stems stretch upward rather than branch out, she doesn't pose as much of a threat to passers-by. Ms. McMillion's solution to transplanting her prickly pals is ingenious: She wraps a length of tightly rolled newspapers around the base of the plant, and uses a pair of long-handled grabbers to prune damaged leaves and remove offshoots for transplanting.

Fred and Wilma share the landscape with a mind-boggling collection of more than 500 cactuses and succulents, and while clearly a strong element of design is evident, Ms. McMillion studiously avoided ending up with the "polka-dot" effect caused when plants are simply stuck in the ground without purpose or planning. As a result, her design makes sense. The exquisite specimen plantings work harmoniously together, beginning at ground level with the rocks that cover every square inch of soil.

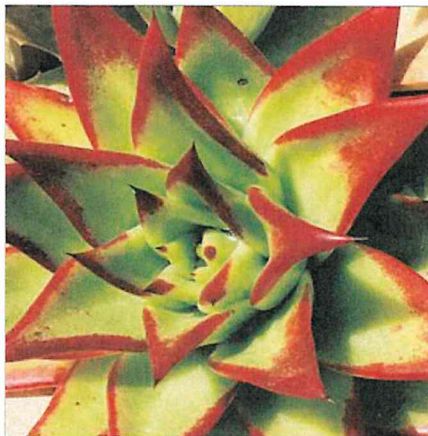
"I am absolutely mad about rocks!" Ms. McMillion gleefully admits. "Boulders, Mexican cresta, lava rubble, river rocks, gravel — I love them all so much that I made them the starting point for my design. When they were delivered, the boulders were so enormous without any plants around them that I was afraid I'd made a terrible mistake. But now it all looks like it was meant to be, and, in fact, I regularly trim the bigger plants so they won't block the view of my beautiful rocks!"

Her design features a dry river bed that runs from the downspout at the corner of the house and meanders through the yard, all the way down to the sidewalk. Different colors and sizes of rocks afford plenty of open space, which is surprising in a yard bursting with so many beautiful plants. In addition to succulents and cactuses, Ms. McMillion includes occasional ornamentals such as salvia, slipper plant and sweet alyssum to attract bees and hummingbirds. Artfully arranged vignettes, metal sculptures, whimsical signs and assorted objets d'art abound, and they all hold special meanings for her.



Meet the happy couple — Wilma and Fred.

A purple hopseed bush screens and shades.



Escheveria 'Lipstick'

DEANA RAE MCMILLION PHOTO

Cuttings in the "hospital" wagon.

LINDA SULLIVAN BAITY PHOTO

"Everywhere I look in my yard is a story or a souvenir or a plant that started as a cutting from a dear friend. It gives me so much joy to walk around my garden and be reminded about people I love."

Memories abound in the side yard as well, where Ms. McMillion works most of her propagation magic. A potting bench also serves as a hospital for ailing plants, and shelves in a shady corner of the patio hold "nursery flats" of cuttings in various stages of development. A variety of larger cuttings are growing in decorative ceramic pots, most of them destined for eventual planting in the ground. Her propagation regimen uses an organic cactus potting mix, to which she adds pumice or lava rock for better drainage.

As for watering, her advice is simple: don't!

"Overwatering is the No. 1 enemy of succulents. My drip irrigation system is turned off entirely from October to March, and the rest of the year, it's set to emit only 30 percent of capacity for everything except the cacti and agave, which get nothing. Imagine how big they'd grow if I actually watered them!"

The side yard also features a naturalistic 12-foot hedge of purple-leafed hopseed bush that serves both to screen the view of the neighboring house and to provide shade to the narrow planting strip at the base of the fence. "It's 15 feet long and 4 feet wide and it contains (at last count) 92 different varieties of succulents. How is that even possible?"

By channeling her inner artist, Ms. McMillion has taken her yard from bare canvas to the Painted Desert of Carpinteria. It's an amazing artistic and horticultural achievement that the creator herself sometimes can't quite believe.

"This is my garden? I did this? Wow."

Our sentiments exactly.

*Linda Sullivan Baity is program coordinator for the UC Master Gardeners of Santa Barbara County. Do you have questions about your home garden for the Master Gardeners? Contact the Helpline by calling 893-3485 or emailing [anrmgsb@ucanr.edu](mailto:anrmgsb@ucanr.edu). To find more gardening resources, go to [cesantabarbara.ucanr.edu/Master\\_Gardener](http://cesantabarbara.ucanr.edu/Master_Gardener) or [www.facebook.com/sbmastergardeners](http://www.facebook.com/sbmastergardeners).*

#### **FYI**

Master Gardener Deana Rae McMillion will be sharing her knowledge about growing succulents in a workshop entitled "How to Make a Succulent Pumpkin Centerpiece" from 10 a.m. to noon Oct. 28 at Terra Sol Garden Center, 5320 Overpass Road. Space is limited and advance registration is encouraged. For more information and to register, visit <http://ucanr.edu/survey/survey.cfm?surveynumber=21960>.