

The Dry Garden: Poodles and plants on the Theodore Payne tour

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It was a hybrid call of the wild that Gilda Garcia heard when she decided to do a native garden in the frontyard of her North Hollywood home in 2006. As she recalled it during a mid-March visit, “The challenge was how could you mix native plants, Mexican art and poodles?”



As is often the case, she was joking. Garcia, an illustrator, has a playful cast of mind. But the garden that she eventually produced, part of the [April 10 and 11 Theodore Payne Foundation garden tour](#), is called “Poodleville” for a reason.

Poodles became a refrain in Garcia’s life when she and her then-fiancé (now husband) Mark Brunke used to hike local canyons. During the climbs, they’d remark on their ruggedness by saying, “Look, no poodles in this group.”

Yet when they moved into their North Hollywood rental home in 1993, Garcia began planting little statues of poodles around the house. They got a real one, the big kind. Eventually they got more.

Being an artist, Garcia started painting the poodles.

In 1996, they bought their rental, stripped the paint from its brickwork, stuccoed over the clapboard and widened the porch columns to give what had been a generic Valley tract house a Southwestern feel. Then, as they took on the front garden, their old “no poodles in this group” joke rebounded on them: They took out lawn as well as lollipop hedges that could have been designed in a poodle parlor. The couple wanted to incorporate rugged “no poodles here” native plants but make it practical for a household with poodles -- three of them. Plus Garcia had an ever-mounting collection of poodle art.

They launched into the project by taking a Theodore Payne tour.

“I wanted to see how much of the existing garden I should delete,” Garcia said. She came back thinking, “Take out all the grass. Not just some of it. All of it.”

Grass remains in the back -- for the poodles. But Garcia came away from the Payne tour in love with the power of paths. “I wanted to be able to look around corners and see surprises that would pull you in,” she said.





Above: The wild mix of colors and textures is a dramatic departure from the lollipop hedges and static lawn seen in Garcia's photos taken before and during the garden transformation, below.

"I took a designing class right afterward," Garcia said. "I drew out the scale of the yard and put in the paths, the trees, the things I knew were going to go, then I just did bubble drawings of the rest."

Among the native plants that Garcia wanted were white sage and manzanita. Yet while plucking these elements native to a chaparral landscape, Garcia's overriding vision was a highly personalized desert. She wanted a palo verde tree and lots of cactus.

There would also be art: Mexican art, pottery and, naturally, poodle elements.

Even if space in this column allowed for a path-by-path description of what is now, four years later, Poodleville, words do not. This is the garden of a woman whose idea of a party is inviting friends to come over on weekends to make art. It is a public space managed in a highly personal manner that is so witty, it winks. Yet at the same time it celebrates the blithe stoic beauty of the Southwest.

Finally, it's the product of someone who took the Theodore Payne Foundation tour as much to find her own style as to study the style of others.

-- Emily Green





Above: *Sphaeralcea ambigua*.

Photo credits: Poodleville sign and two "before" photos from Gilda Garcia; all others by Anne Cusack / Los Angeles Times

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