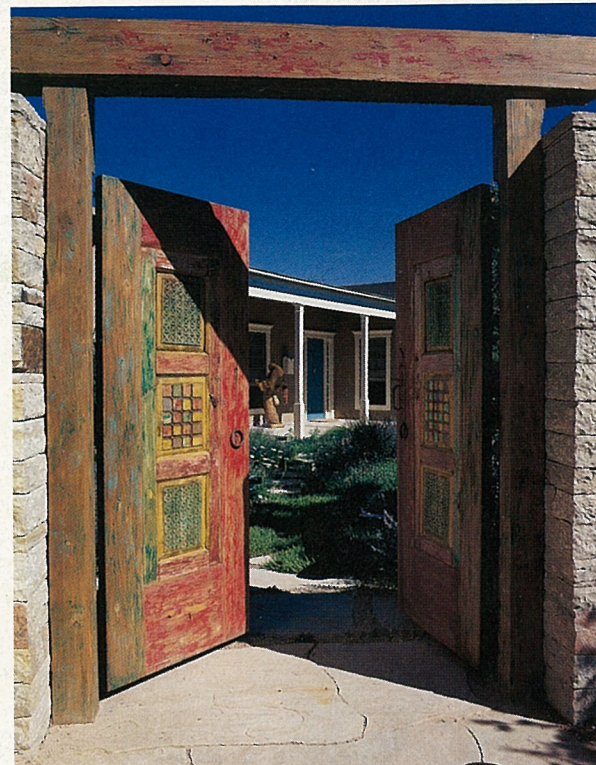


# At Home in the High Desert

DRY-LOVING PLANTS AND A  
ROCK-TERRACED SLOPE MARRY THIS  
SANTA FE GARDEN TO ITS HIGH-DESERT  
SETTING. SEE HOW SIMILAR FEATURES  
CAN WORK WHERE YOU LIVE.

By Andria Hayday



Few jewels match the allure of the Santa Fe sky, a sweeping vault so bright and intensely blue that it has captivated artists for centuries. “The sun shines 340 days a year,” says Texan Mary Jo Harrod, who bought a second home in Santa Fe with her husband, Jack, after being drawn by the area’s natural beauty and vibrant cultural scene.

Despite the intense sun, summers in northern New Mexico are surprisingly mild. “We’re at 7,000 feet,” Mary Jo explains. “This is the high desert.” Thanks to the elevation, temperatures seldom top 90°F. But precipitation is scant, so unless you like

astronomical water bills, this is still no place for thirsty bluegrass lawns or English ivies.

Ironically, that’s just the sort of water-guzzling garden one designer proposed after the Harrods bought their property in 1998. The couple immediately gave the plan a thumbs-down. “It didn’t fit,” Mary Jo says. “We wanted something more natural—something that would blend with the surrounding landscape.”

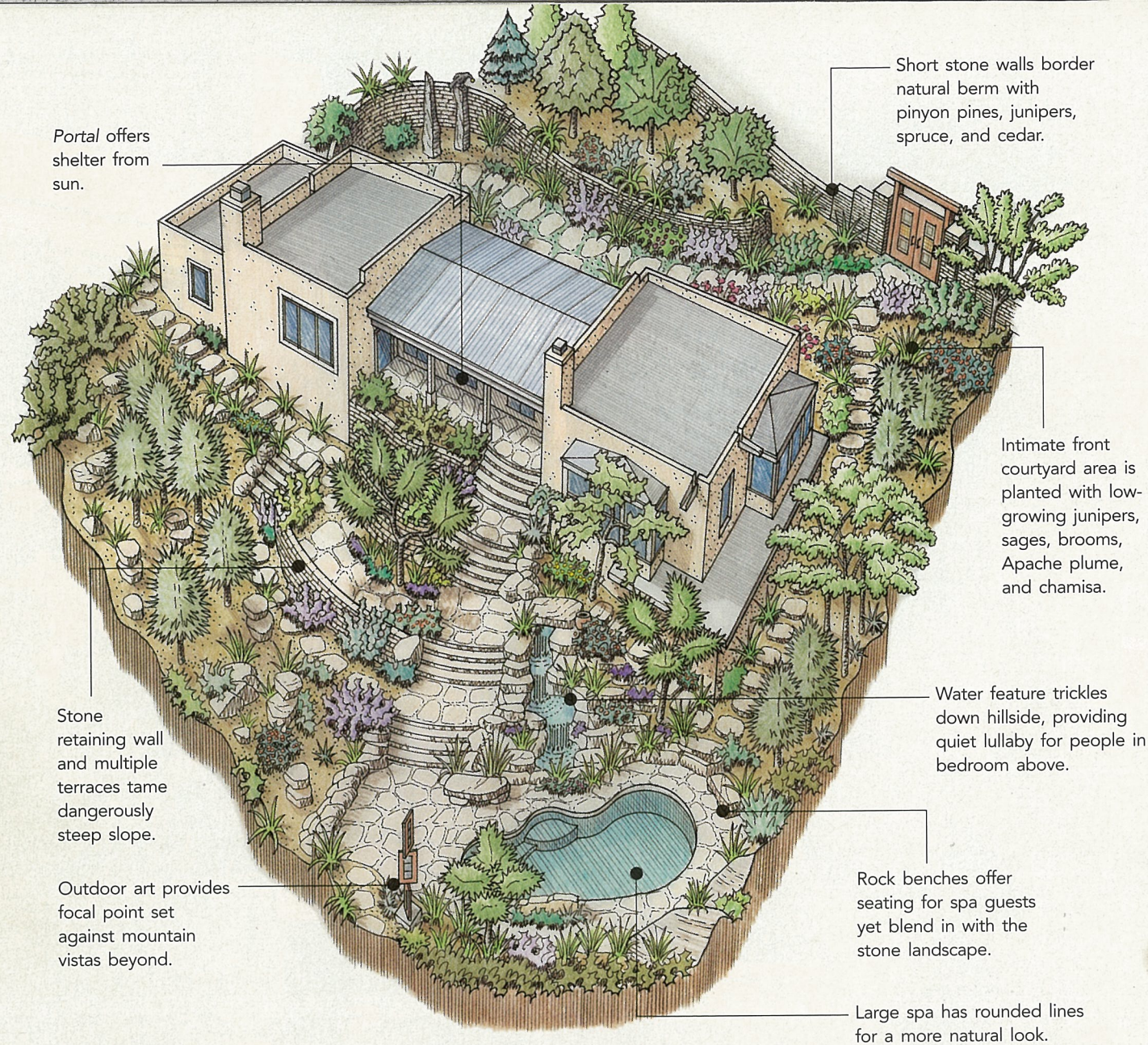
The Harrods’ hillside home features a rear *portal* (a covered patio) that looks east toward the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Red foothills dotted with pinyon pines roll toward the horizon, merging with steeper and more darkly forested slopes. “After I saw that view,” Mary Jo says, “I barely noticed anything else about the house.”

When the Harrods moved in, a wild tangle of pinyons and mountain mahogany covered much of



**ABOVE:** Colorful doors from Pakistan accent Jack and Mary Jo Harrod’s front gate. Lavender, daisies, and catmint line the path to the front *portal*, which shelters a statue of San Pasqual, patron saint of the kitchen, carved out of cottonwood. **OPPOSITE:** Compact mounds of blue fescue (*Festuca glauca*) lead past a bronze sculpture made by Dan Namingha, a local Tewa/Hopi artist.





Portal offers shelter from sun.

Short stone walls border natural berm with pinyon pines, junipers, spruce, and cedar.

Intimate front courtyard area is planted with low-growing junipers, sages, brooms, Apache plume, and chamisa.

Water feature trickles down hillside, providing quiet lullaby for people in bedroom above.

Stone retaining wall and multiple terraces tame dangerously steep slope.

Outdoor art provides focal point set against mountain vistas beyond.

Rock benches offer seating for spa guests yet blend in with the stone landscape.

Large spa has rounded lines for a more natural look.

## CREATE A WATER-THRIFTY GARDEN

With drought conditions periodically affecting many parts of the country, planting a water-thrifty garden makes good sense. Here are some tips on getting started.

- Choose drought-tolerant plants (see list on page 71 for examples).
- Limit the lawn. Keep it small and avoid thirsty turf such as Kentucky bluegrass. Plant buffalo grass instead.
- Mulch heavily. Mulch holds water, keeps soil cooler in summer, and limits weeds. Compost or wood chips are best.

- Water deeply to promote deep roots. It's better to irrigate an inch of water once a week than to offer a light spritz every day. Beware of overwatering, however, especially if soil doesn't drain well. Drought-tolerant plants become sickly when wet.
- Capture rainwater from rooftops by connecting downspouts to rain barrels (See Resources, page 100). Use the rainwater to irrigate plants in your garden.
- Channel runoff by digging swales so water is distributed more evenly. (See page 42 for an example of a swale.)

- Group plants by water needs to avoid overwatering plants that favor dry conditions. For example, pinyons often perish when watered like relatively thirsty aspen trees.
- Water wisely. Drip irrigation systems and soaker hoses are far more efficient than using sprinklers and watering by hand. Create watering circuits, tailoring automatic watering schedules to the specific needs of plants.
- Don't overfertilize. Plants may not get enough water to sustain the lush growth that results.



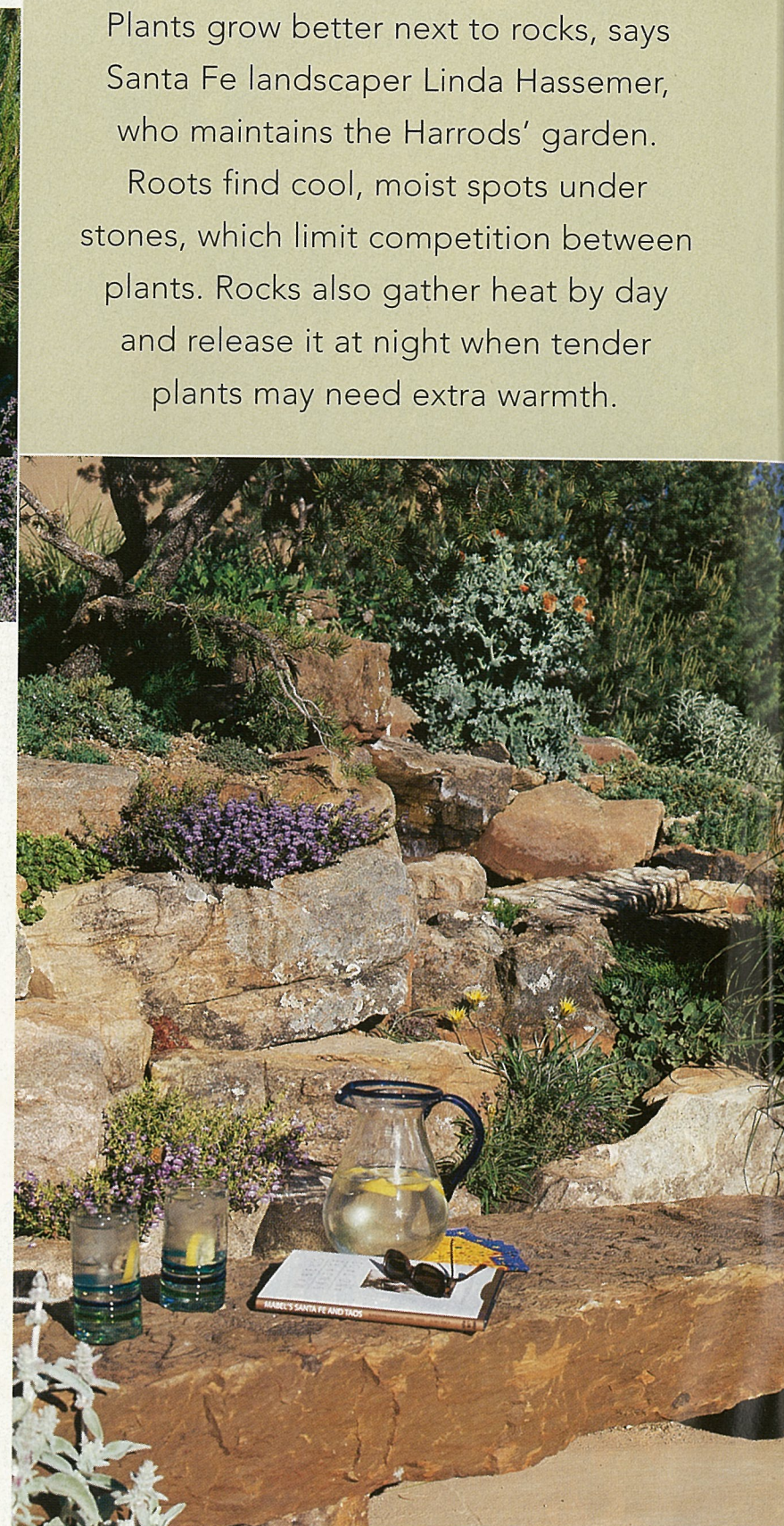
ABOVE: 'Six Hills Giant' catmint (*Nepeta* spp.) and 'Moonshine' yarrow (*Achillea* spp.) surround a Tanyosho pine topiary (*Pinus densiflora*). RIGHT: A stone bench encourages respite on the flagstone patio rimming the spa.

their lot. It was natural, Mary Jo admits, but it was also completely unusable. "To get down from the portal, I had to sit on the edge and drop almost 4 feet," she explains. "There was very little ground you could walk on. I'd slip and slide down the hill, grabbing onto branches."

Today, broad flagstone stairs descend from the portal and lead down the slope. On one side of the steps, retaining walls create a terraced garden. On the opposite side, massive stones quarried from nearby mountains form a naturalistic rockery, accented by a tumbling custom-built stream. A pump hidden at the base of the stream recycles the water to the top. Directly below, a spa shimmers on a flagstone patio. The water features offer a cool counterpoint to the dry landscape, not to mention a spot for birds to quench their thirst.

Landscape architect David Lovro developed much of the design on-site. For several months, a small backhoe sculpted the earth and maneuvered tons of moss rock (a local stone that's actually covered with lichens) across the hill. "Many of the rocks were just manhandled into place," Lovro notes. "We couldn't get large equipment behind the house."

Erosion posed another challenge. Although



Plants grow better next to rocks, says Santa Fe landscaper Linda Hassemer, who maintains the Harrods' garden. Roots find cool, moist spots under stones, which limit competition between plants. Rocks also gather heat by day and release it at night when tender plants may need extra warmth.





Recently planted evergreens are especially sensitive to winter kill. Water them deeply before the ground freezes or as often as once a month if the ground remains unfrozen.

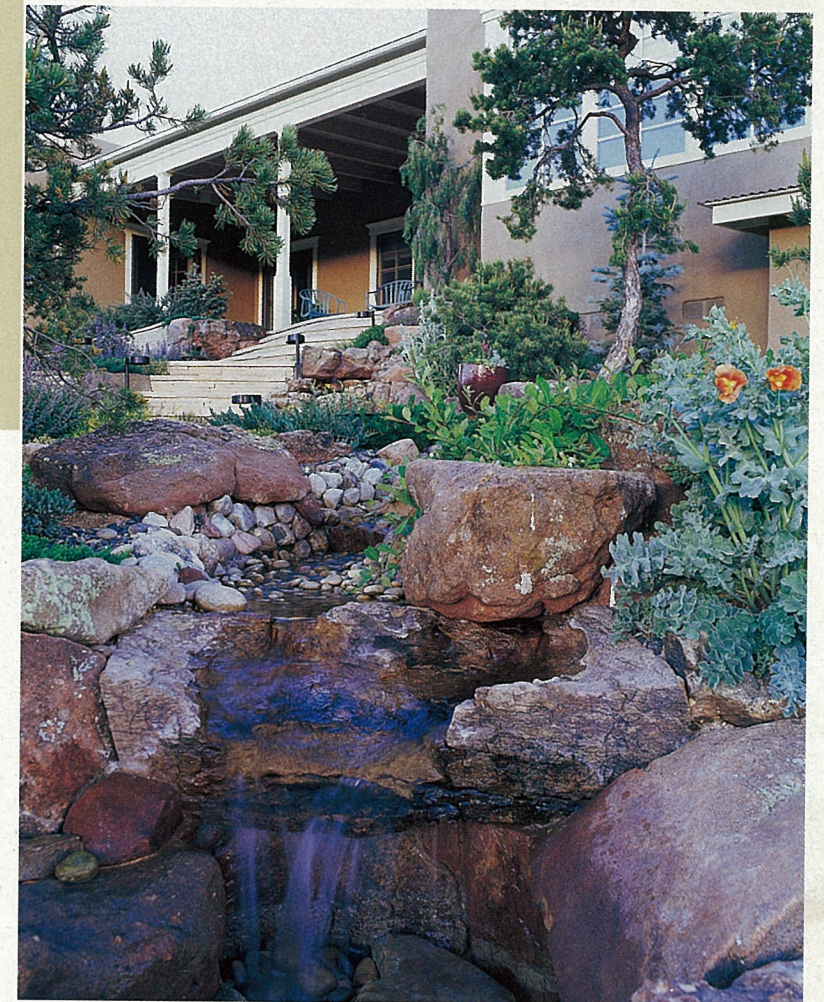
Santa Fe's annual rainfall is low, clouds build quickly on summer afternoons and release brief but intense torrents that Lovro likens to monsoons. "We had to divert the drainage coming from the house to keep it from washing away the slope," he says. "As we placed the stonework, we created avenues to direct and distribute the water." Some of the rainwater spreads onto the terraces, while the overflow heads safely downhill.

Most of the original mountain mahogany was removed to create the terracing, but the Harrods preserved the pinyons. To fill the surrounding landscape, they shopped local nurseries that specialize in drought-tolerant plants. "Letting someone else pick out my plants is like asking them to pick out my clothes," says Mary Jo, who challenged Lovro to help her find places for everything she chose.

Some of the selections are true natives, including yellow-flowering chamisa, which often grows along Santa Fe roadsides. Others echo the silvery-green hues and mounded shapes of desert flora. Lavender, Russian sage, and drifts of catmint blanket the terraces, while sedum and ornamental grasses flourish in the rockery.

Although the plants are drought-tolerant, they still need supplemental watering. The Harrods installed an efficient drip irrigation system that runs from May to October. "You almost can't live without one here," Mary Jo says, "at least not when you're getting started and the roots are establishing

**OPPOSITE:** African daisies (*Arctotis* spp.) favor dry, rocky soil. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Sounds from a stream beneath the bedroom windows create a lullaby at night. The vibrant orange blooms of a horned poppy (*Glaucium corniculatum*) overlook a waterfall near the base. The recirculating pump lies beneath the rocks.



## HOW ROOTS DEAL WITH DROUGHT

Plants that thrive in dry conditions often have specialized root systems to help them through lean times. Plants with long taproots can reach moisture deep in the soil when soil closer to the surface is dry. Oaks, hickories, and members of the carrot family are examples. Sinuous roots

go deep into cracks and crevices in search of moisture and nutrients. Lavender, sage, and other plants commonly found on rocky hillsides have sinuous roots. Plants such as daylily and *Liriope* have thick, fleshy roots that can store moisture.



taproot



sinuous root



water-storing root

Illustrator: Eric Flynn





## PLANTS FOR DRY SOIL

You don't have to live in the desert to get good mileage out of drought-tolerant plants. These species succeed in a wide range of hardiness Zones, but they require well-drained soil.

COMMON NAME	BOTANICAL NAME	ZONES
Bellflower	<i>Campanula morettiana</i>	5-7
Black-eyed Susan	<i>Rudbeckia fulgida</i>	4-9
Blanket flower	<i>Gaillardia</i> spp.	3-8
Blue avena grass	<i>Helictotrichon sempervirens</i>	4-9
Blue fescue grass	<i>Festuca glauca</i>	4-8
Blue grama grass	<i>Bouteloua gracilis</i>	5-9
Catmint	<i>Nepeta</i> spp.	3-8
Creeping thyme	<i>Thymus</i> spp.	5-9
Garden sage	<i>Salvia nemorosa</i>	5-9
Lamb's-ears	<i>Stachys byzantina</i>	4-9
Lavender	<i>Lavendula angustifolia</i>	5-8
Maiden grass	<i>Miscanthus</i> spp.	4-9
Pine-leaf penstemon	<i>Penstemon pinifolius</i>	4-10
Prairie skullcap	<i>Scutellaria resinosa</i>	4-8
Purple coneflower	<i>Echinacea purpurea</i>	3-9
Russian sage	<i>Perovskia atriplicifolia</i>	5-9
Speedwell	<i>Veronica spicata</i>	3-8
Stoncrop	<i>Sedum</i> spp.	3-10
Tickseed	<i>Coreopsis verticillata</i>	4-9
Yarrow	<i>Achillea</i> spp.	3-9

themselves. After a few years, the plants should be able to get by with much less help."

Mary Jo collects unusual evergreens with twisted and weeping shapes. She also likes dwarf plants with unique textures. "I enjoy sitting on the steps and peering at little plants in the nooks and crannies of the rocks, seeing how seeds have rooted in a tiny pocket of soil," she says. One of the garden's most successful self-starters is dwarf snapdragon (*Chaenorhinum* spp.), which bears tiny bluish-purple blooms from spring to fall.

While Mary Jo appreciates the smaller things in life, Jack likes things "Texas-size." The spa is a prime example; he wanted it big enough for 10. "I told him I didn't know 10 people I wanted to be in hot water with," Mary Jo jokes.

She certainly didn't plan on sharing the spa with an ursine terror. The Harrods had just gone to bed one night when they heard a big splash outside their window. A roving bear was taking a swim. Apparently impressed by the "creature comforts," it later returned with friends.

Eventually the bears departed, but the Harrods are here to stay. "This is an incredibly special place," Mary Jo says. She often finds herself sitting in the garden, soaking up the scent of sage and lavender while watching clouds form over the mountains. "Sometimes that's all the entertainment I need." □

FOR RESOURCES, SEE PAGE 100.

Photographer: Laurie Dickson

Landscape architect: David Lovro, ASLA



**OPPOSITE:** Native flora, gravel mulch, and locally quarried stone marry this garden to its spectacular backdrop, the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. A native pinyon pine (*Pinus edulis*) frames the walk. **ABOVE LEFT:** Mary Jo and Jack wanted a naturalistic garden to complement their Santa Fe home's high-desert vistas. **ABOVE:** Stone terracing and an oasislike spa becken in this rear garden, once an overgrown no-man's-land. Drought-tolerant plantings include Indian ricegrass (*Oryzopsis hymenoides*), whose feathery form is reflected in the water.