

# The Lush Life

Santa Fe Permaculture creates abundant gardens in a region where water is scarce.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY CHARLES MANN

**D**ry, scruffy, and struggling is no way to go through life, but these are conditions often encountered in cultivating water-challenged New Mexico landscapes. Fortunately, there's a revolution afoot that looks beyond xeriscaping to the next generation of design: permaculture. Melissa McDonald, her husband, Nate Downey, and their company, Santa Fe Permaculture, use this approach to put the beauty back in the beast of high-desert gardening. Master gardener and landscape architect McDonald handles the creative-design end, while Downey—an energetic, self-described “landscape changer”—is a popular lecturer and teacher, and the author of *Harvest the Rain: How to Enrich Your Life by Seeing Every Storm as a Resource* (Sunstone Press). Together they have spent nearly two decades designing and installing some of the most beautiful gardens in the capital city, and changing the notion of what a water-wise landscape can look like.

“The basic ingredients of all of our projects are beauty, ecology, and comfort,” says McDonald. “When we blend these together and give them a little time to rise, say through a growing season or two, our landscapes remind me of a fresh batch of bizcochitos, the New Mexico state cookie. They’re elegant, sweet, inspiring, and yes,” she adds with a wide smile, “they’re meant to be a little dry, too.”

McDonald’s skill lies in crafting attractive gardens that ultimately thrive on less water than most. She sets white roses, yellow prairie zinnia, and purple-flowered butterfly bushes alongside tomatoes, corn, and kid-pleasing teepees made of bean vines. By grading patios into basins that catch water, reshaping the land with swales, building healthy soil by composting and mulching, capturing roof water in underground cisterns, or using plants that are well adapted to the Southwest, McDonald is following a basic principle of permaculture: When we create the right conditions, nature will then do the work for us. Going further, McDonald designs pumice wicks. These lava-rock-filled trenches are hidden under the garden, where they capture rainwater runoff from roofs and release our most valuable resource slowly to the roots of nearby plants.

Along with cultivating beauty, permaculture designs encompass all the things that affect the environment, including children, animals, food production, outdoor living, recycling, composting, sun, shade, and wind. It’s all part of the picture. McDonald and Downey are showing us how to create economical, environmentally friendly landscapes that are also sensual and seductive parts of our daily lives.

Water from the roof of this Eldorado home is diverted to a super-efficient pumice-wick system. With no moving parts and almost no maintenance, these underground sponges slowly release runoff to the roots of nearby perennials. The result is an inviting landscape that brims with biodiversity. New Mexico flora becomes most inviting when you use dramatic pollen-providers like blue mist spirea and Russian sage; delicious, healthy edibles like bronze fennel; and an umbellifer that’s great for attracting ladybugs.





The UPS truck used to pull right up to this Upper Canyon Road abode. Now we find one of Santa Fe Permaculture's signature "magic spots," complete with shade, fruit trees, the gurgling of a fountain, and plenty of eye candy—like these bursts of mauve soapwort cascading voluptuously over a moss-rock sitting wall. "Small fountains can be very good for the local environment by providing water for birds and bees," Downey says, "and they really don't use much water if you place them in the shade."

# Permaculture Priorities

## TIP No. 1

### *Design, budget, and schedule.*

Develop a long-term plan before installing key components of your landscape. Many folks install large trees, planting beds, patios, walls, and fences without much forethought, but this approach limits a property's potential and can be very costly to remedy.

## TIP No. 2

### *Grow some food.*

Growing at least a little bit of your own food is tasty, healthy, fun, and soul satisfying. Annual and perennial edibles can be integrated into the landscape or protected in a wildlife-safe magic spot.

McDonald thinks it's important to encourage children to explore the outdoors at an early age. "Edibles can do this because kids love putting things in their mouths," she says, "but it's also critical to make special places in the garden that are just for children. Places that are scaled for smaller sizes make lifetime memories and help inspire the stewards of the Earth that will be needed when the kids grow up and discover they're in charge."



## TIP No. 3

### *Define your pathways.*

In arid lands like ours, determine your pathways early on. Wherever people, pets, and vehicles wander freely, the soil becomes compacted and much less able to absorb precious water.



Once upon a time, this lively garden was just one big lawn. It used a horrendous amount of water, and suffered greatly from the regular but disorderly trampling of feet. After defining pathways and drastically reducing the size of the turfed area, Santa Fe Permaculture brought in an array of plants that bloom throughout the growing season. Purple flowered salvia, penstemon, sedum (in bloom at left), snow-in-summer, and poppy mallow are all eye catchers, as are the ornamental grasses (maidenhair, stipa) and Siberian iris, which often hold their form through fall and winter.





In addition to benefiting from shade, outdoor living rooms and smaller magic spots are also enhanced by privacy screening and protection from wind. In tight spaces, vines and trees that can be easily pruned can do these jobs inexpensively. Above, a trumpet vine with large orange flowers creates three or four additional vertical feet of privacy screening and wind protection. The bush-like New Mexico privet is an extremely drought-tolerant tree that doesn't mind unskilled pruning. Also known as the New Mexico olive, its multiple trunks are great for making neighbors disappear and for creating a substantial wind buffer.

#### TIP No. 4

### *Create magic spots.*

Comfortable outdoor niches enhance the value of your property by including shade trees, pergolas, windbreaks, privacy screening, and noise-abating plants.

#### TIP No. 5

### *Know your roof's potential.*

The downspouts from your roof are excellent sources of water for plants. Capturing roof water reduces your water bill and carbon footprint, and prevents sediment from polluting rivers downslope.



#### TIP No. 6

### *Start small.*

Our environment is challenging, so it's best to build on your successes rather than take on too many landscape projects at once.



#### TIP No. 7

To learn more, refer to Downey's book, *Harvest the Rain: How to Enrich Your Life by Seeing Every Storm as a Resource*, and consult [sfpermaculture.com](http://sfpermaculture.com) and [permadesign.com](http://permadesign.com).

Nate Downey and  
Melissa McDonald



Downey and McDonald rarely encourage fountains in sunny, windy microclimates, but sometimes symbols of water (like the large ceramic pot, above, filled with big trunks of bamboo) do the aesthetic trick of drawing people out into their gardens. A meandering path can have the same function, especially when the path diverts rainwater and snowmelt to healthy apple trees supported by pumice wicks.





Surrounded by drought-resistant perennials, this fountain draws butterflies, birds, and humans into the yard. "The garden uses less water than the struggling lawn it replaced," says Downey.