

# PHOENIX HOME & GARDEN

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## *Holiday Planning*

**Designer Decorating Tips**

**Intoxicating Recipes**

**Garden Gift Ideas**



This page: Above a poolside ramada made of teak and bamboo, palm fronds sway lazily in the wind. Along the mountainside, water spills down boulders into a Jacuzzi and then into a Mediterranean-blue lagoonlike pool.

Opposite: A view toward the guest house reveals the rocky terrain that makes up this precipitous landscape.

# Desert Island

*A hillside garden*

TEXT BY NANCY CHRISTENSEN • PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHARLES MANN

## *Bora Bora.*

That's what the homeowners wanted their hillside property in Paradise Valley to look like.

It was a rather far-fetched idea, given that their desert dwelling is located in one of the driest regions of the United States. The landscape project ensued, however, and was achieved by incorporating a variety of trees, bushes, vines and flowers that are commonly, and not so commonly, seen throughout the Valley.

For environmental landscape designer Troy Bankord of T.M. Bankord Inc., this was a dream assignment. "I pretty much had carte blanche when it came to acquiring the plants," he says. But before he even began selecting them, he traveled to Hawaii to study its tropical and semi-arid vegetation.

"I was surprised to see varieties of island trees that mirror our native acacias and mesquites," he recalls. "It was my hope to bring a tropical feeling back to Arizona and create the impression that you were someplace totally different, not on Camelback Mountain."

This was not an easy task. For one thing, the residence is located high on the side of the mountain, wedged between sizable boulders. "It's a virtual wind tunnel up there," Bankord remarks. "When the monsoons come in, the winds can blow up to 30 miles an hour at the top."

It became apparent that some of the vegetation could not adapt. To compensate, Bankord substituted hardier plant varieties and doubled the frequency of watering to combat the rapidly drying soil.

Aside from the obvious drawbacks, there also are advantages to these climatic conditions. According to the homeowners, when temperatures are soaring elsewhere, the strong breezes make it feel several degrees cooler. Add to that the element of swaying palm trees, the home's architectural style, and a misting, volcanic water feature spilling into a Caribbean-blue pool, and it actually does feel a bit like Tahiti.

On the home's upper terrace, Bankord added a mix of tropical plant varieties. One of his favorites is cocculus, which looks similar to citrus with its deep-green leaf. Yucca, yellow bird of paradise, wedelia, kalanchoe, pineapple guava, pencil euphorbia and a variety of palms were added for color and texture.

Once the upper area was complete, work began on the biggest and most difficult portion of the job: the unification of the lush upper terrace with the desert hillside. Although blessed with native palo verde and masses of creosote and brittlebush, the hillside had little else. It was Bankord's task to create a tropical oasis for the owners using only viable vegetation, yet not disturb any existing plant material.

"There are many plant species at our disposal that have tropical appeal," notes the landscape designer. "There is a perception by many that desert plants only have a place in arid desert landscapes, when in fact, there are hundreds of species that lend themselves to a tropical environment."

Creeping wedelia, with its quick-growing root system, dark-green foliage and golden-yellow flowers, now blankets the hillside and anchors the soil on the steep incline. "We found the hillside soil eroding from the El Niño rains, and it was giving out from under our feet," Bankord recalls. "Plants were literally rolling downhill in their containers."

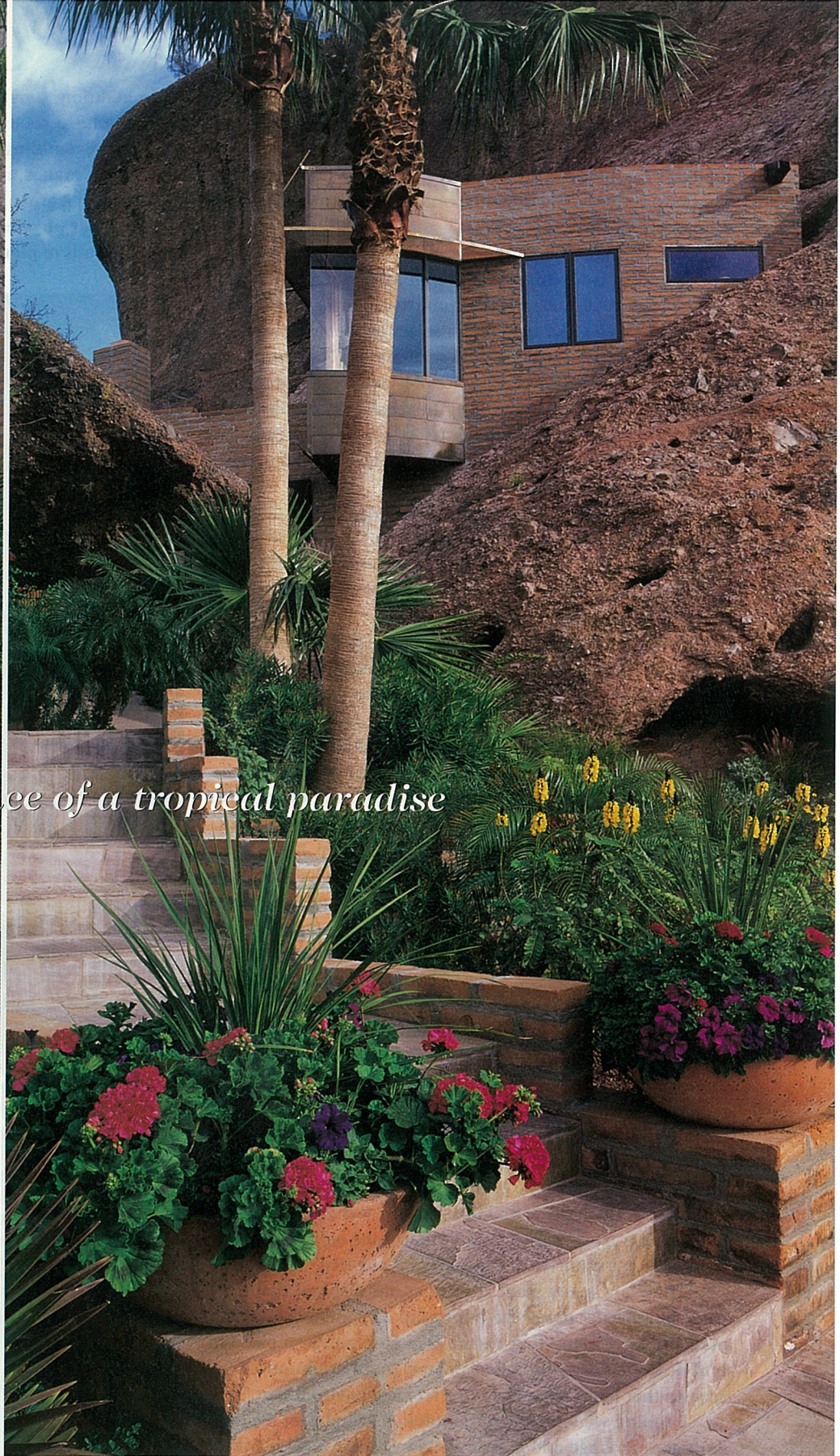
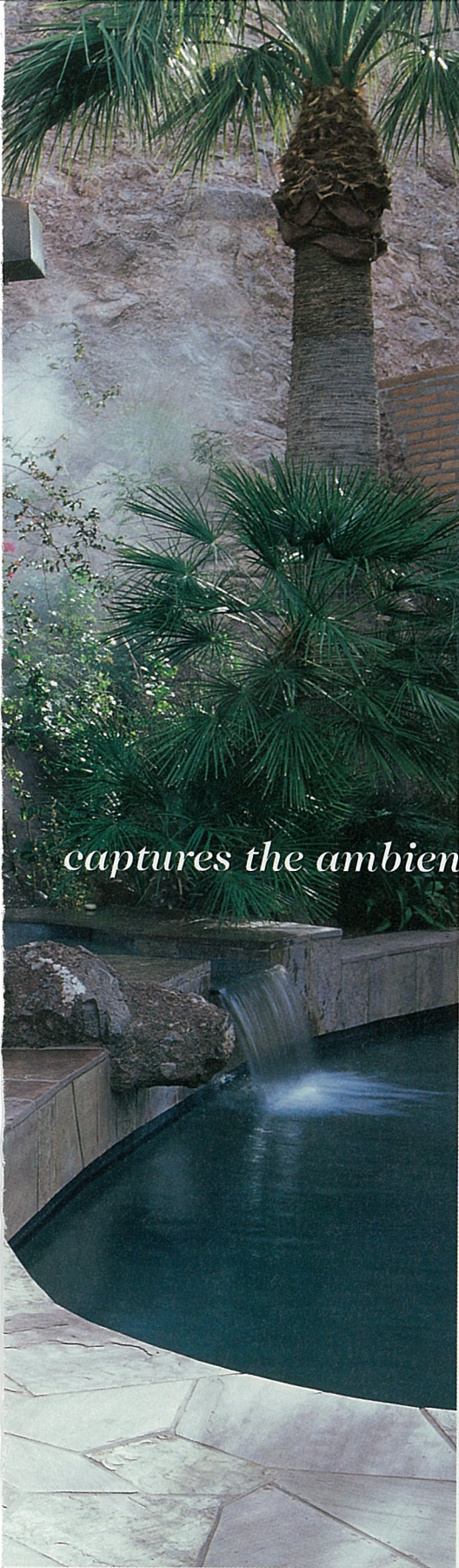
In addition, tons of soil had to be brought in to supplement the hard rocky terrain. Chilean mesquites and red boulders resembling those on Camelback Mountain were placed with cranes, and a meandering nature path was created through a grove of towering foxtail palms.

The most physically grueling part of the job was hauling thousands of plants up the hill, where they were placed



**This photo: On a brick terrace a three-tiered fountain is surrounded by banana trees, cocculus, asparagus fern, bougainvillea, calla lilies and bamboo palms.**

**Inset: A water feature built alongside native boulders is located near the top of this hillside property. Downtown Phoenix is visible in the background. The iron figure was purchased in Sedona by the homeowners.**



*captures the ambience of a tropical paradise*

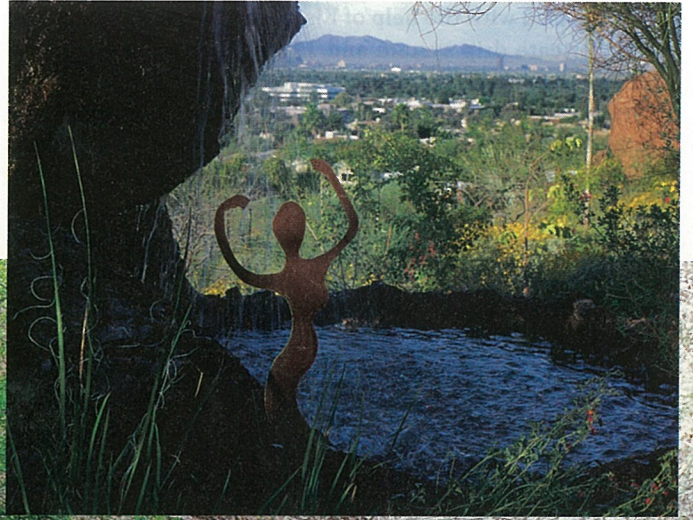
*the hillside and anchor the soil on the steep incline. "We found the hillside soil eroding from the El Niño rains, and it was giving out from under our feet," Bamford recalls. "Plants*

Something Polynesian and tropical, like the South Seas town where the couple owns a restaurant.

one by one. And because irrigation had not been installed at this point, it was the chore of one worker to do nothing else but continuously water the newly planted vegetation.

"The challenges on this job were incredible," Bankord acknowledges.

The irrigation, a sophisticated system that moves water from the bottom of the hill to a holding tank above,



was devised with the help of Kisich Sprinkler & Landscape. An intricate drip system and 12-inch pop-up spray heads create a maze of piping that traverses the hillside. Three irrigation clocks and 30 stations maintain a watering schedule 24 hours a day, seven days a week. "The stations can't overlap, or there won't be enough pressure to draw the water where it needs to go," Bankord explains.

Challenges conquered, the property now flourishes with just about anything green, tropical-looking and flowering. Thousands of bougainvillea, penstemon, purple ruellia, pink oleander, orchid trees, popcorn cassia, Arizona yellow bells, Mexican bird of paradise and orange jubilee provide dramatic

displays of color. Canna lilies, fairy duster, wand flower and masses of moraea iris and hesperaloe nestle among the vegetation. And to bring cohesiveness to the design, Bankord added scores of robellini and queen sago palms, red yucca and wild castor bean.

The project took a little over a year to complete, but the homeowners were thrilled, particularly when several of the banana trees that were planted produced their first crop of fruit. "None of us could believe it," Bankord remarks. "Bananas on Camelback Mountain?"

Now all that's missing are a couple of piña colodas and the sound of the ocean lapping against the shore. 🌴

*See Resource Guide for details.*






**Opposite:** Adding to the Tahitian theme, landscape designer Troy Bankord chose to plant a grove of foxtail palms because they look so much like coconut palms.


**Left:** Alongside steps leading to the house, yellow-flowering popcorn cassia (it smells like buttered popcorn), petunias, geraniums and lobelia provide tropical appeal.


**Below:** Looking downhill toward the water feature, brittlebush, bougainvillea and foxtail palms flourish.



### *Watering Tips:*

 When planting on a rocky property, it's imperative that you monitor your irrigation system regularly to make sure vegetation is getting enough water. With so little soil between rocks, water retention is not always adequate and plants dry out.

 In addition to drip systems, spray heads allow parched-looking desert plants to take on a more lush appearance. The additional humidity also helps keep fire danger to a minimum. Running the sprays only in the early morning minimizes mildew, fungus and evaporation.

 "You can have a good maintenance crew and spend a lot of money on plants, but if you don't have a good watering system, you don't have anything. That's the bottom line in Arizona," says landscape designer Troy Bankord.