



Suburban Update

MARIE WHITE'S FRONT-YARD MAKEOVER RESULTS IN A USER-FRIENDLY SPACE

A landscape design that takes into account the mature size of plants and trees is critical in a smaller front yard. Arizona homeowner Marie White added visual interest with contrasting foliage textures and colors in her garden.

Most people prefer a welcoming entry for their home, and they often try to spruce it up by adding a few pots of flowers near their door," observes landscape designer Marie White. "However," she tutors, "don't be afraid to extend a welcoming feeling all the way to the curb."

White recently updated her small Ahwatukee, Arizona, front yard and explains that simple design changes helped her overcome its "uninviting" features.

"Usability is a key factor in any design project," White notes. "Unfortunately, our front yard contained awkward elements typical of many basic subdivision lots." For example, there was no hardscape surface to walk on at the edge of the driveway nearest the home's entrance. "I see this problem in small front yards frequently," she says. "Open car doors scrape against plants in the landscape, and instead of firm footing, you step on decomposed granite or wet lawn to get in and out of the car."

In addition, a straight concrete sidewalk adjacent to the garage wall created a confining corridor toward the front door with limited planting space. Narrow concrete entry steps made maneuverability difficult, especially at night, and unattractive hose bibs and water pipes sat next to the sidewalk in full view, within yards of the front door.

Along with tackling these problems during the redesign, White decided to install low-voltage lighting and a small seating area to expand outdoor living options. "I wanted to sit down with neighbors, rather than stand in the driveway while we chatted," she says.

White incorporated a variety of curving elements that helped solve problems while lending aesthetic appeal. "Curves tend to be more inviting to the eye than straight lines," notes White. She widened and curved the front steps for safer access, adding bull-nosed pavers with a slight overhang to give the edge of the steps a finished look.

She also removed the straight concrete sidewalk and replaced it with a five-stone paver mix that she laid with a gentle curve.



Above left: Marie White holds her favorite gardening tool, the Soil Scoop. Its curved shape is ideal for adding soil to pots and digging in rocky soil. **Above right:** White's redesigned front walkway provides an inviting entrance with additional space to access vehicles in the driveway.



EASY UPDATE

Just like fashion and interior furnishings, popular outdoor paint and hardscape colors change over time. Marie White's Arizona neighborhood has transitioned to a darker palette from the light stucco and decomposed granite shades prevalent when it was developed in the 1980s and '90s.

To update the look of the home and complement its darker exterior, White

replaced the original decomposed granite with a chipped version of rock in a medium tone that includes four hues of brown. "This particular color blends well with the updated color palettes and creates a nice contrast for plants," White comments. If adding boulders or dry riverbeds, choose tones that blend with the rock ground cover for the most natural look, she advises.



Although the space was narrow, she “pulled” the walk several feet away from the garage wall to allow for a small planting bed. Here, she added coral fountain (*Russelia equisetiformis*) and other plants to hide the unsightly water utilities while still allowing access to them. Coral fountain’s bright coral blooms also provide an attention-grabbing clue for visitors in the driveway, beckoning them toward the door.

The front yard contained some plants that White kept to reuse in the redesign, including a palo brea tree and a large columnar cactus with golden barrel cacti planted around its base. She added a few more golden barrels to emphasize the existing circular pattern. “The curve of the barrels draws the eye and pulls you around the walkway to the front door,” she points out.

Her 10-year-old palo brea’s canopy had grown tall enough to walk and sit under, creating a pleasant spot for a bistro table



PLANT FAVES

Listed below are six plants Marie White recommends for specific uses. Accent plants draw the eye to a focal point or place; screening plants cover block walls, create privacy or hide utilities; and “trooper” plants are survivors that thrive in difficult conditions with minimal care. All take full sun, are evergreen, thornless, water-thrifty and work well in pots.

ACCENT PLANTS

- **Coral fountain** (*Russelia equisetiformis*)—Unique “fountain-like” shape that grows to 3’ high; small coral flowers that appear from early spring through fall attract hummingbirds.
- **Golden barrel** (*Echinocactus grusonii*)—Adds year-round color without relying on flowers.

SCREENING PLANTS

- **Lavender starflower** (*Grewia occidentalis*)—Pretty, small flowers grow on stiff-limbed branches; this heat-loving plant can be staked vertically or trained as a ground cover.
- **Twisted myrtle** (*Myrtus communis* “Boetica”)—Think of it as giant bonsai, suggests White. A snip here or there keeps it close to a wall; its dark-green foliage is fragrant if brushed against.

TROOPER PLANTS

- **Elephant’s food** (*Portulacaria afra*)—Tiny green succulent leaves and thick reddish-brown stems provide color in challenging growing areas with reflected heat. “When people tell me they kill all of their plants, I say, ‘Here’s a plant you can’t kill,’” White says with a laugh. This one is a good solution for those tiny planting areas in rock waterfalls by swimming pools.
- **Candelilla** (*Euphorbia antisiphilitica*). Compact vertical form with gray-green stems; this low-water-use plant propagates on its own.

Top: Twisted acacia’s dark-green leaves and dark-brown branches add interesting contrast to the lime-green limbs and leaves of a palo brea tree. **Left:** Twisted myrtle puts out a fragrant bloom.



and chairs atop pavers. "Even a small seating area warms up the front yard visually and makes friendly interaction within the neighborhood easier," she observes.

For continuity, White used the same five-stone paver pattern as the walkway but cut an inch off the ends of various pavers to create a custom permeable surface, which is essential for plant roots.

"Be very careful when making changes around existing trees," cautions White, a Master Gardener volunteer with University of Arizona Cooperative Extension. "Tree roots require air and water. Laying a solid hardscape surface such as concrete or mortared brick on top of established roots will kill your tree over time."

White has a fine arts degree in graphic design and worked in advertising for 28 years before starting her business, Living Rooms Landscape Design in 2005. "I've lived in Arizona 25 years and love the desert and gardening," she states. "I wanted to be outdoors working with plants instead of indoors with a computer."

Clockwise from above left: Coral fountain's draping habit softens hardscape edges. ■ Front-yard seating encourages neighbors to stop by and chat. ■ Even small yards can harbor wildlife. The unique branches of a twisted acacia tree provide a perfect nesting spot for a mourning dove.

To help achieve her goal, she completed the Desert Botanical Garden's Desert Landscaper Certification Program and advanced training. "I enjoy using my design and problem-solving skills to help people achieve multi-use outdoor living spaces that complement their interests.

"Don't let a small front yard inhibit your creativity," White advises. "Desert dwellers are lucky to have a plant palette of native and desert-adapted plants with a variety of looks that can be modified to our city's many different styles of architecture. We don't have to be stuck with cookie-cutter yards." □

See Sources.