

Better Homes & Gardens

 **NEW
SPINS ON
CLASSIC
POPS**
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*Ready,
Set,*
SUMMER

CHILL, GRILL, AND
GET OUTSIDE

+
EASY
CONTAINERS
FOR EVERY
PATIO

29

IDEAS FOR FOOD AND FUN ON THE FOURTH

In landscape designer Margie Grace's Montecito, CA, yard, a stone vessel of water provides a visual break in the dry landscape and a drinking spot for birds.

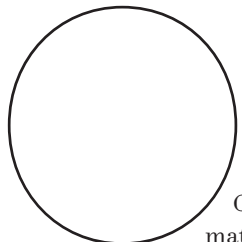


PRETTY/TOUGH

A drought-tolerant gravel garden can be just as soft and inviting as one packed with plants.

Margie took advantage of the shade beneath an old oak tree by creating an intimate seating area. The antique concrete dining set, cast to look like wood, blends in with the landscape.





ne of landscape designer Margie Grace's favorite materials is so humble it rarely gets a second thought. "I love gravel," she says. "It feels so timeless and earthy, and you know the soil is breathing beneath it."

In the yard around her and partner Dawn Close's ranch house in Montecito, CA, gravel is the foundation of her design. By combining the material with airy grasses and perennials, she created a space that's easygoing, surprisingly soft-looking, and drought-tolerant. "I really, really wanted to crack the nut on water," Margie says. (Though her area gets little rain year-round, drought conditions can occur anywhere in the country.) "I wanted super-low water use but a lush feel."

She also wanted to find a way to carve the backyard, which was an expanse of drought-dead grass when she moved in, into different garden rooms. Now, gravel paths and barefoot-friendly concrete pavers wind among the mature oak trees, gently waving grasses, and structural succulents to distinct seating and dining areas.

Even though she uses fewer plants than many designers might ("A way to use less water is to use less plant material," she says), Margie appreciates the particular charms of each one, like the golden grasses. "Right around 5 o'clock there's a beam of light that comes through the seed heads, and it's frickin' magic," she says. "The show is over in seven minutes, but it's worth organizing your day around."



CATCH THE LIGHT
Elevate gold-tinged plants like ornamental grasses or these cordylines so they can shimmer in the sunlight.



CREATE A BUFFER
A stone patio around the house helps keep gravel from being tracked inside.



Tufts of green soften paths of geometric concrete pavers and gravel. Although the plants vary—grasslike sedge, clipped boxwood, and fuzzy lamb's-ear—they share a similar spherelike shape.



Margie Grace works a few surprises into the calm and consistent design.

A custom firepit, *far left*, made from a repurposed industrial propane tank and filled with crushed clear glass, sits at the center of the outdoor living room. A gravel frame ties the firepit to the rest of the yard.

The majority of Margie's garden relies on foliage, but she plants a handful of water-wise flowers for color. In this pocket, *above left*, bright orange California poppies, which reseed themselves each year, mix with fern leaf lavender. (Get a similar look with other garden poppies suited to your growing zone.)

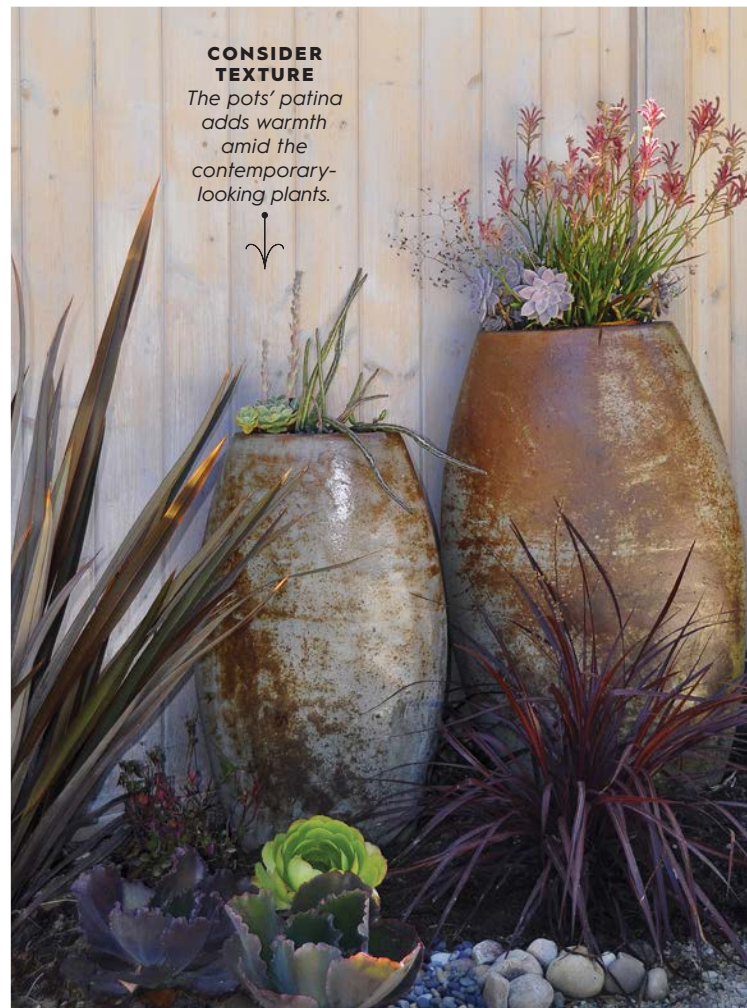
Tall pots, *left*, bring low-growing plants to eye level for some height in a narrow border.

A gravel path lined with tufts of grass, *far left*, leads through whimsical purple arbors (Gracie Modern Arbors by TerraTrellis) that function as sculpture. Margie hung strings of mirrored garland on them and calls this the "Purple Rain" garden.



CONSIDER TEXTURE

The pots' patina adds warmth amid the contemporary-looking plants.



The dirt on gravel Gravel is a versatile element that suits a wide variety of garden styles: sleekly contemporary, casual and friendly, or Versailles-level formal. The material visually connects different areas in the yard and serves as soothing negative space. Practically, it can be used for a driveway, a walkway, or as mulch, planted (as Margie does) with unthirsty grasses. It's flexible, not particularly expensive, and less permanent than concrete.

1 CHOOSE

Gravel comes in a range of colors, including tawny browns and cool grays. When choosing gravel, Margie brings all the materials she plans to use to make sure the colors harmonize. "I get a chunk of the paving stone I'm going to use into the back of the car," she says. She recommends crushed gravel for driveways but larger rocks, at least ¾ inch, for areas that will have leaves blown off them.

2 INSTALL

Margie uses gravel directly on soil, although gardeners in rainier regions should use a base layer of landscape cloth to keep the gravel out of the mud. Prepare soil by leveling and firming it. A ½- to 1-inch-thick layer of gravel is plenty. If you can make distinct footprints, it's too deep. Where people will walk in bare feet, use smooth concrete or stone pavers.

3 MAINTAIN

Although it's an effective mulch, weeds can still take root in gravel. About once a month, Margie uses a stirrup hoe to dispense with them while they're young—before they go to seed. Occasional raking keeps gravel looking neat, and leaf-blowing a few times a season clears fallen leaves. Every few years, replenish spots that look thin and get a lot of traffic. ■