

# BY DESIGN

by Tom McDonald, Smiling Dog Landscapes

Recently while on a trip to Silver City, New Mexico, I had an epiphany, triggered by seeing one of my favorite plants, *Salvia greggii* growing in the full sun, right out in the open. Now *Salvia greggii* has my admiration because it draws hummingbirds to the garden with its ever present red tubular flowers. Unfortunately, in the Sonoran Desert, it needs protection from the sun and careful watering during the summer months or it won't survive. Yet there in Silver City, at the end of a blistering summer, my favorite was looking grand.



I was introduced to this plant in the late spring when it was looking great, but that summer I learned the lesson of 'right plant in the right place'. My 'design' was flawed because I had made some unfounded assumptions about the plant and the environment in which I placed it. Consequently many of that first round of salvia plantings did not survive.

So my epiphany is this: Man, who definitely is not native to the desert environment, is one of the most adaptable creatures to survive in the arid southwest. We bring tools, technologies, plants and animals to support and sustain us in this strange land. We use design to strategically incorporate these pieces to create an environment in which we can thrive.

We humans tend to make a lot of unfounded assumptions and, in turn pay the cost of our flawed designs. We tend to embrace those things that work quickly, sometimes at the expense of long term benefits.

The art of designing landscapes has been around for a long time and nowhere is it more important than here in the Sonoran Desert. Changes we might make without thought in cooler, wetter climates could be a waste of time and resources in the desert. Color, texture, mature size of plants, use of light, shade and a dozen other interrelated elements all need to be considered when creating a beautiful, sustainable outdoor living space.

Here are a few tips for you to think about;

- Do your home work: Planting a blue agave [whose mature size is equal to that of a small water buffalo] 2' from a sidewalk is not going to work.
- Rule of odd numbers: Elements placed in groups of three are aesthetically more pleasing than even numbers.
- Open space is good: It is not necessary to fill every single square foot of yard with plants, or statues of gnomes. Leave some blank canvass.
- Forget the gnomes: period.
- Boulders need to match [unless you are a rock hound with a compulsion to collect stones from every continent and have an understanding spouse]
- Install boulders: Dig them in a few inches so they look like they are connected to the earth not blown out of a volcano.
- Avoid straight lines: Paths and hardscapes that curve and 'wander' are gentler and more inviting.

Join with me in striving to be mindful in placing all of these wonderful elements in your landscape and let's do it by design!

Classes at Smiling Dog Landscapes in November

- Free Irrigation Class November 11
- Free Curandero Walk November 17

Please register at 480-288-8749 or e-mail [info@smilingdoglandscapes.com](mailto:info@smilingdoglandscapes.com)