

Sculpted vs. Natural

There seems to be two main schools of thought when it comes to what folks like and dislike in their desert landscapes. One group, let's call them the Law-and-Order-Crowd, keep their shrubs pruned in neat, geometric shapes. Spheres, squares and flat sides are the norm. All hardscape edges must be kept free of foliage, and bushes are never, ever allowed to grow into each other. These folks like orderly landscapes and spend a good deal of time on a regular schedule pruning, raking, and the like to attain the near perfection that they crave.

The other group, for the purpose of this dissertation we shall call the Wild Bunch, have standards that are no less stringent, just in the opposite direction of the L.O.C.s. These folks loudly proclaim to like the natural look. Their shrubs can grow willy nilly in every direction and if a volunteer leucophyllum grows up in the middle of their Radiation Lantana, well, they are pleased that they have two for the price of one. The W.B.s often embrace our desert wild life, even as the bunnies or other critters make a meal of their yard. Their maintenance style often kicks in shortly after they have received the warning letter from the H.O.A. (a group that usually has decidedly L.O.C. leanings.)

In gardening, as in politics, it is not always accurate to paint folks with a broad brush. Some Law-and-Order types will have a few Wild Bunch characteristics and vice a versa. It is not the mission of this discussion to judge either philosophy, but rather celebrate that wonderful diversity which makes the human tribe so very interesting.

Things get really interesting when you have a W.B. and a L.O.C. in the same family with equal decision making powers. Such is the case of a couple I know, of whom shall remain nameless in order that the author might not be invited to sleep on the couch for an extended period of time. The male partner of this twosome is defiantly a W.B. kind of guy. Indeed, when a volunteer Texas Sage (silver foliage, purple flowers) popped up uninvited among his Autumn Sage (green foliage, red flowers) he was delighted, marveling at the lovely contrast of the two intertwined in the flower bed. That is until he came home one day to find that his L.O.C. wife had "cleaned" the bed and restored it to its previous neat, albeit boring, order. When the Batface Cuphea, which had started life in their garden as a cute one gallon accent splash of color became an overpowering monster visible on satellite photos, Husband thrilled at the vigorousness and vitality of an otherwise difficult to grow plant. Wife on the other hand, showing great good sense, simply got out the shears and promptly reduced the upstart to a manageable size.

There is a lesson to be learned from all this. While each philosophy in its pure form has a place and function somewhere in the world, sometimes a compromise between the two makes more sense. You can have a "neat" landscape with a little wildness. In fact, as in Nature, it is sometimes that little bit of chaos contrasting with order that makes a powerful statement in our landscapes.