

# Desert Bloom

by Scott Restivo

Along South Cloverdale Avenue in Los Angeles, the front yards present a monotony of green, varied only occasionally by a few flowers or a short hedgerow. The green strip ends abruptly, however, at #1025, the home of the Kwan Um School of Zen's Dharma Zen Center. There, a desert garden blooms, abounding in red, yellow, orange and violet flowers.

The garden is the work of the Center's former abbot, Mu Ryang Sunim. Soon after he became abbot in 1991, the monk began to question the wisdom of watering the front lawn two or three times per week. "I wanted to get rid of the grass ever since we moved

here," he says. Why encourage the growth of a plant (grass) that is not native and not adapted to the hot, dry climate of Southern California, especially when the area was in the grips of a five-year drought, he wondered. Because the grass is foreign to the climate, it requires extra water, fertilizers and other chemicals to grow.

Mu Ryang Sunim consulted gardening experts and garden books and drew up a plan for a garden with plants tolerant of the desert conditions instead of the water-dependent lawn grass. "My requirements were a meditative, low-water-usage, low-maintenance garden," he says.

In January, 1992, he stopped watering the lawn, which soon turned brown. He then rototilled the dried-out sod. He left a Carob tree that was growing along the street and a Bird of Paradise along the back wall near the house.

For the new garden, he put in graceful Mexican bamboo and morning glories along the side fence. In the main section of the garden, the monk planted a patchwork of colorful flowers. Rising from a groundcover of dark green Rosemary are clumps of Orange Sedges, silver-gray Dusty Millers, yellow Sage, pink Primroses, blue Plumbagos and deep red Kangaroo Paws. The plants present a variety of textures, including lacy Yarrows, felt-covered Sage, smooth Sedums and shiny Dusty Miller. Myoporum, Weeping Juniper and Mallow trees add height to the garden. Along with the Bird of Paradise, a Purple-queen Bougainvillea graces the back wall.

The plants the monk chose have several adaptations to the dry heat of a desert. Rosemary has narrow, leathery leaves that retard evaporation and thereby retain moisture. The Sedums are succulents with thick leaves that store water for future use. Others, such as the Fescues, have extensive root systems that allow collection of the scant water in the soil.

The abbot gathered rocks from the San Gabriel River Valley and beaches along the Pacific Ocean for use in the garden. These smooth and speckled rocks are strategically placed so that their light color offsets the rich hues of the growing plants.

To emphasize the meditative aspect of the garden, Mu Ryang Su Mim included an olive tree (for peace), a Bodhi tree and a Hand of Buddha (a type of lemon tree). He also added a juniper, a member of the cypress family. A famous kong-an reads: a monk once asked Zen Master Joju, "Why did Bodhidharma come to China?" Joju answered, "The cypress tree in the garden." The abbot points to the juniper and says, "There's our cypress tree in the garden."

The garden has been well-received by the neighbors, some of whom ask for advice on plantings. Birds and butterflies, drawn to the many flowers and seeds, have become more numerous. The Dharma Center is helping in its small way by reducing its water use. The beauty is a welcome by-product. "We transformed another boring and water-guzzling grassy lawn into a drought-tolerant Buddhist garden," Mu Ryang Sunim says. ☉

