

DROUGHT: ALTERNATIVES FOR A LOW-WATER WORLD

GARDEN DESIGN

SUMMER 2015



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Q & A WITH MARY ELLEN COWAN

BY MEGAN PADILLA



Danish by blood but a Texan who misses her home state's hot sauce and a cold Corona beer if away too long, landscape designer Mary Ellen Cowan of the Dallas firm MESA (www.mesadesigngroup.com) applies a Scandinavian sensibility for clean lines, a consistent palette, and strong composition

to the firm's growing residential portfolio, which she's led for the past 18 years. "Our design celebrates and interacts with nature," says Cowan, "but combines with man-made materials." Expect gravel for clean planes, trees to define spaces and grids, creatively conceived applications for concrete, and, whenever possible, water features. "We don't have much water in Texas, but we all love it."

WATER FEATURE

"One of my favorite water features we've installed is a scrim, only 1/4-inch deep. It's minimalist—it doesn't require a lot of water to look full, and not much water is lost to evaporation. When still, it reflects the tree canopy and the sky above, in all its colorations—overcast, passing clouds, and shadows. It's an ever-changing canvas. And though it has a quiet quality, the owners' grandkids love running through and splashing in it."

WHAT TO GROW

"Fortunately, people are becoming more water wise and understand that you can't force plants to live where they don't belong. I try to make use of agaves, sedges, yuccas, salvias, and native grasses. There is beauty in what grows here."

PROJECT-PLANNING ADVICE

"First, really know your site. Listen to Mother Nature to learn about your land's traits. Be honest with light, moisture conditions, and the topography, and learn what plants grow well in your soil. From there, you can figure out what to do, design-wise."



FAVORITE MATERIAL

"People often think of concrete as the thing you put in to save money. But it's a beautiful material that can be used in any shape and form and finish—I love it and use a lot of it. My hardscape palette also includes locally sourced Lueders limestone that speaks to our area with its soft browns, grays, and creamy tones; as well as crushed granite gravel from Marble Falls, Texas. It comes in a variety of colors and is both permeable and easily workable—you can plant right in it."

FINAL TOUCHES

"My go-to designers for décor

are Richard Schultz for timeless, streamlined furniture that lasts forever; Greenform (green-form.com) for containers made with recyclable fiber cement; or Seibert & Rice (seibert-rice.com) for terra-cotta containers."

WHAT TO READ

"A book for people interested in how gardens are thought about and created is Frederick Law Olmstead's *A Clearing in the Distance* (Scribner, 2000). For anyone wanting to know more about Texas plants, Sally and Andy Wasowski cover them region by region in *Native Texas Plants: Landscaping Region by Region* (Taylor Trade Publishing, 2003). But a favorite I'd recommend to anyone is Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods* (Algonquin Books, updated and expanded edition 2008), which examines the importance of designing communities to include natural spaces for kids to play."

Above: This reflection pool is the focal point of the backyard. A perennial garden borders the pool with four ginkgo trees beyond.

Below: These 22-inch-tall Ginko planters by Greenform are filled with succulents for a clean, modern look.



Above: A "low-water" water feature that's under a foot deep makes a great spot for the owners to dip their feet on warm summer days.

