

Landscaping tour shows off water-wise sanctuaries

By Hilary Sloane

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The Morongo Basin Conservation Association showcased homes with desert-friendly yards at the annual Desert-Wise Landscape Tour April 22-23.

Homes in Joshua Tree, Twentynine Palms, Yucca Valley, Pioneertown and Morongo Valley were viewed.

The tour's purpose is to raise awareness of the fragile desert ecosystem and to introduce people to native, drought-tolerant plants and how to become water-wise. The added pleasure of the tour was discovering the creative and varied homes and gardens people have made for themselves.

About 400 people took the tour.

Robin and Manuel Anaya's Tower Homestead in Twentynine Palms was built by Robin's grandfather in the 1930s. Situated on 43 acres, it features rock hardscape and Western memorabilia. Each room inside the house is a cornucopia of a time gone by, exhibiting family memorabilia and newly acquired antiques. Outside, desert finds and existing cacti make a unique backdrop for the house and several Western-style outbuildings and trailers. Tour participants were engulfed in whimsical creations and vignettes.

The Wheelhouse, once owned by Huell Howser in the '90s, is now owned by sculptor Joan Robey and her husband. The name Wheelhouse derives from the five 100-year old millstones Howser acquired that still surround the swimming pool. The house sits on 11.9 acres with an additional 70 acres across the street. The great size of Howser's finds and Robey's elegant interior design blend harmoniously with the space, creating a sense of elegance and timelessness.

Miriam Segar's vacation rental sits tucked into the rocks and is surrounded by the national park, Bureau of Land Management property and lands protected by the Mojave Desert Land Trust. The property was once a dump site. The renovated house is off the grid and made of bits of plastic and hardware that come to the surface after each rain. Now, it is a haven for visitors who can live in harmony with the best the desert has to offer.

Brian Leatart and Cheryl Montelle's Joshua Tree Highland property was designed by Canon Hudson and has a 360-degree view of the area. There is a courtyard garden featuring a variety of elevation-specific native species. Leatart said he merged existing plants with some additions, particularly in the center rock garden that highlights the mid-century architecture.

Mojave Moon Ranch, a cozy, mystical domicile of small, inviting gardens, is a joint venture of Dan O'Dowd, who saved the house from the Shack Attack Program and built all the hardscape,

and Allie Irwin, who came in four years ago and added some of the gardens. O'Dowd left all of the creosote and native plants around the 2.5 acres, highlighting agave, mesquite, palo verde, pepper trees and cactus. The large, old honey mesquite in the front of the house, which Irwin calls the mother tree, seems to stand guard and watch over the residence.

Two horses (one miniature) and three dogs greet you as you enter the property. Most of the rocks were brought in, some from Whitewater. The marble used on the floors inside the house were acquired from a contractor.

About the garden areas, Irwin said, "I like to create spaces, but whenever a tree or a plant volunteers something and drops a seed, I let it stay there."

These are only a few examples of the 22 properties on tour. Visitors said they left with a great deal of knowledge and good feeling about the desert.

Clyde Grabski and Kathleen Lowndes, docents at the Harrison House Art and Ecology site, said some visitors came back a second and third time during the day. "Others lingered and lingered, seemingly not wanting to leave," Lowndes said.