

Five Artists  
Have Found Their  
Giverny in the  
Flower Beds,  
Potting Sheds  
and Lawns of  
Southern California

by Susan Heeger  
photographed by Amy Hall



## fertile imaginations

Mixing and matching plants, sketching with paths and hedges: If making a garden isn't truly art, it's undeniably artistic—and some gifted artists who are gardeners definitely blur the line between the two realms. They compose landscapes with plants they want to paint, or grass and bamboo they can haul indoors and play with like so much plaster and wood. What sprouts beside a bench becomes a statement, a sculptural tool, the fixed piece of a collage. As Blue McRight, a Venice painter, puts it, "Artists are like Montessori kindergartners. They find 'materials' in the world around them. 'I could use that,' they're always thinking."

In gardens, of course, plants die. Seeds sprout in odd spots. Bugs eat leaves and other bugs. For a gardener, such is life. For an artist, it can be art. McRight and these four other Southern California artists have gravitated toward gardens in their art. The plants suggest patterns, surprises, themes. They create a stage for ideas.



## Blue McRight →

Ordinary butch-topped turf grass is what preoccupies Blue McRight, who grew up weeding dandelions out of her dad's Delaware lawn—"and not happily," she snorts. For her, the vast clipped and chemically treated rug that rolls out from the East to California symbolizes some of our country's problems and pretensions. "We act as if lawn is part of our aesthetic heritage," she says. "But it's an import from Europe and an absurd one for our climate." Despite its commonness, she believes, lawn dramatizes the gulf between poor neighborhoods and wealthy enclaves, where emerald carpets are always perfect—so perfect, in fact, that during the drought of the early '90s, wealthier owners resorted to lawn paint to preserve a green illusion.

This Hollywood-style makeup job gave McRight an idea. Known as a painter for her resonant mix of landscape and figurative elements and as a public artist for environmentally conscious urban sculpture, she decided to paint bits of living turf shaped in patterns drawn from European parterres. In 1998 she installed her "Lawnsapes" at the Patricia Faure Gallery in Santa Monica. When the show ended a few weeks later, her pieces became compost. "My passion for the environment and nature has put me on a separate track in some ways from the current art scene," she says.

McRight can trace that track back more than 20 years, to her decision to leave the Rhode Island School of Design for a teaching stint with Outward Bound, two years at Evergreen State College in Washington (she majored in fine arts) and a stretch as a river guide and ski instructor in Santa Fe, where she met her husband, architect Warren Wagner.

In Santa Fe, as a way of bringing home the wildness she loved in nature, McRight would garden when she had the chance. Corn, herbs and 200 sunflowers erupted in her first small yard, and when she and Wagner moved to L.A. in 1985, McRight went on planting—vegetables, succulents and assorted flowers in a Venice parkway, and flax, geraniums, ferns and clivia in an Inglewood front bed that earned her a negative citation from the city. "They said our lawn was overgrown. It wasn't a lawn. They didn't get it."

Well, eventually they did, and so did the people who saw her "Lawnsapes," which, according to one reviewer, had a quality foreign to most gallery shows: scent.

Since then, McRight has moved on to a new series of landscape paintings called "On the Lawn," in which she plays with traditional grass-based images and activities: lawn jockeys, lawn chairs, lawn tending. She is plotting a new garden, around the solar-heated studio that Wagner designed for them in Venice. So far, though the plants are still sketchy, she knows this: They will be 90% drought-tolerant and low-maintenance and 100% non-lawn.