

RENEWED INTEREST

When Drainage Problems Threatened to Mar a Backyard, Choosing the Right Landscape Professional Made All the Difference

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL WOODALL

The spacious backyard was one of the many features that the owners loved with they first saw the house. An extensive renovation, which included refinishing the pool and expanding the patio into the desert beyond, has turned the space into a comfortable and stylish retreat for year-round living.



LIFE IN THE SONORAN DESERT AFFORDS

a multitude of benefits: bright, sunny days; cool, crisp nights; awe-inspiring sunrises and sunsets; stargazing as far as the eye can see. It can also bring unexpected challenges, especially when it comes to the one thing you wouldn't think to be a problem in this dry, thirsty environment: water.

Jordan and Jan Ayan quickly learned this after moving into their sprawling Spanish-style home in the North Scottsdale enclave of Whisper Rock. The couple, who relocated to Arizona after 26 years in Chicago, spent an exhaustive search that spanned four days and more than 80 homes before they found their dream home.

"We walked in and immediately knew that this was the one," says Jordan. "But, as is the case with any new home, oftentimes you don't know exactly what you're going to get."

The house sits on an elevated swath of the desert. While the landscape and surrounding views were stunning, there was a slight grade that the Ayans soon learned brought water toward the home rather than away from it.

"After a hard monsoon rain, the backyard and courtyard were completely flooded," Jordan says.

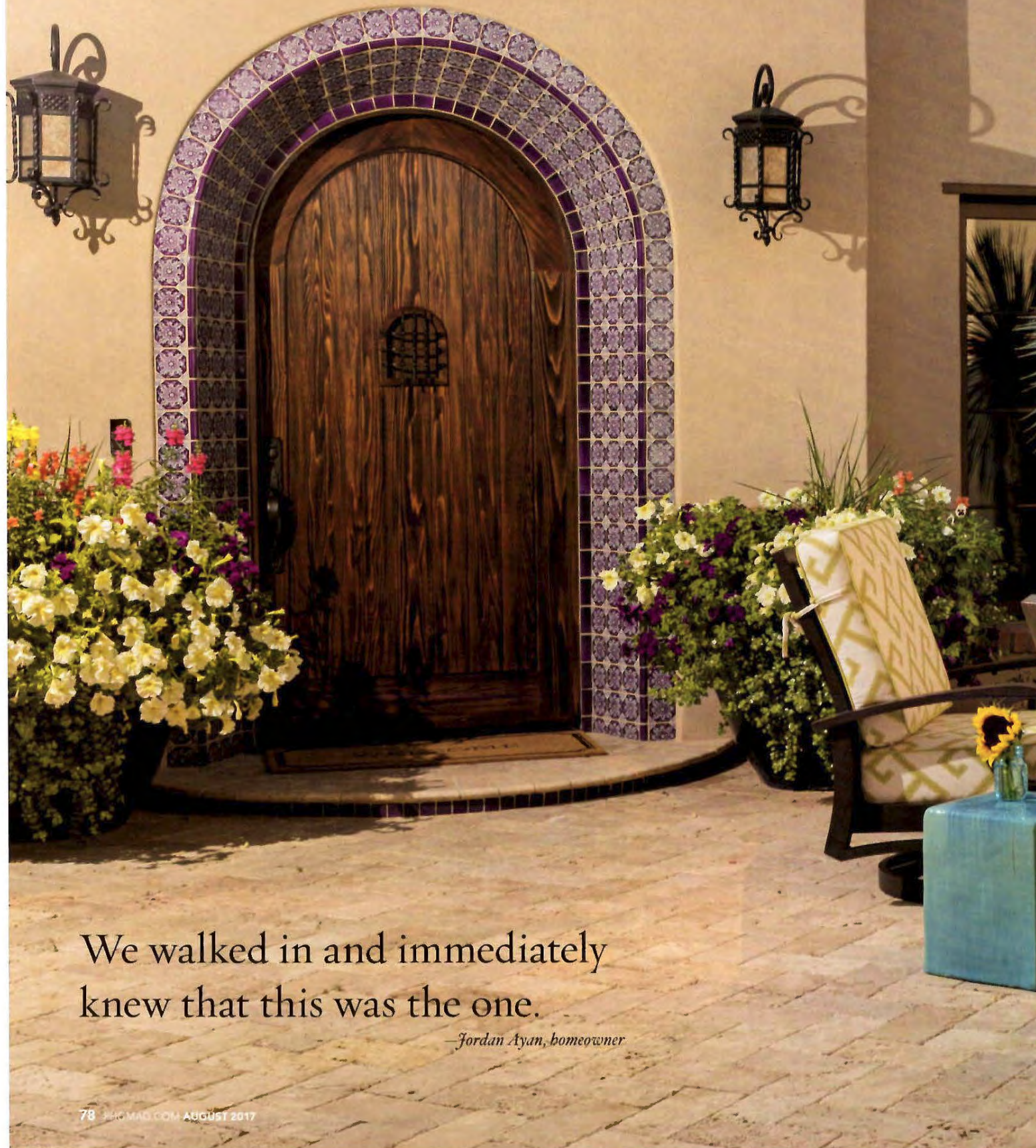
An engineer suggested placing sandbags throughout the property. As aesthetics are paramount to the couple, they politely declined. Another engineer proposed digging giant trenches around the house and covering them with metal grates for drainage.

OPPOSITE AND

ABOVE: A brick-paved driveway leads to the home's front entry. Landscape architect Chad Robert filled a circular raised bed with water-wise plants, such as senita and golden barrel cacti, *Hesperaloe parviflora* and *Euphorbia* and *Sedum* spp. Mexican tile details on the entry stairs were updated during the renovation.



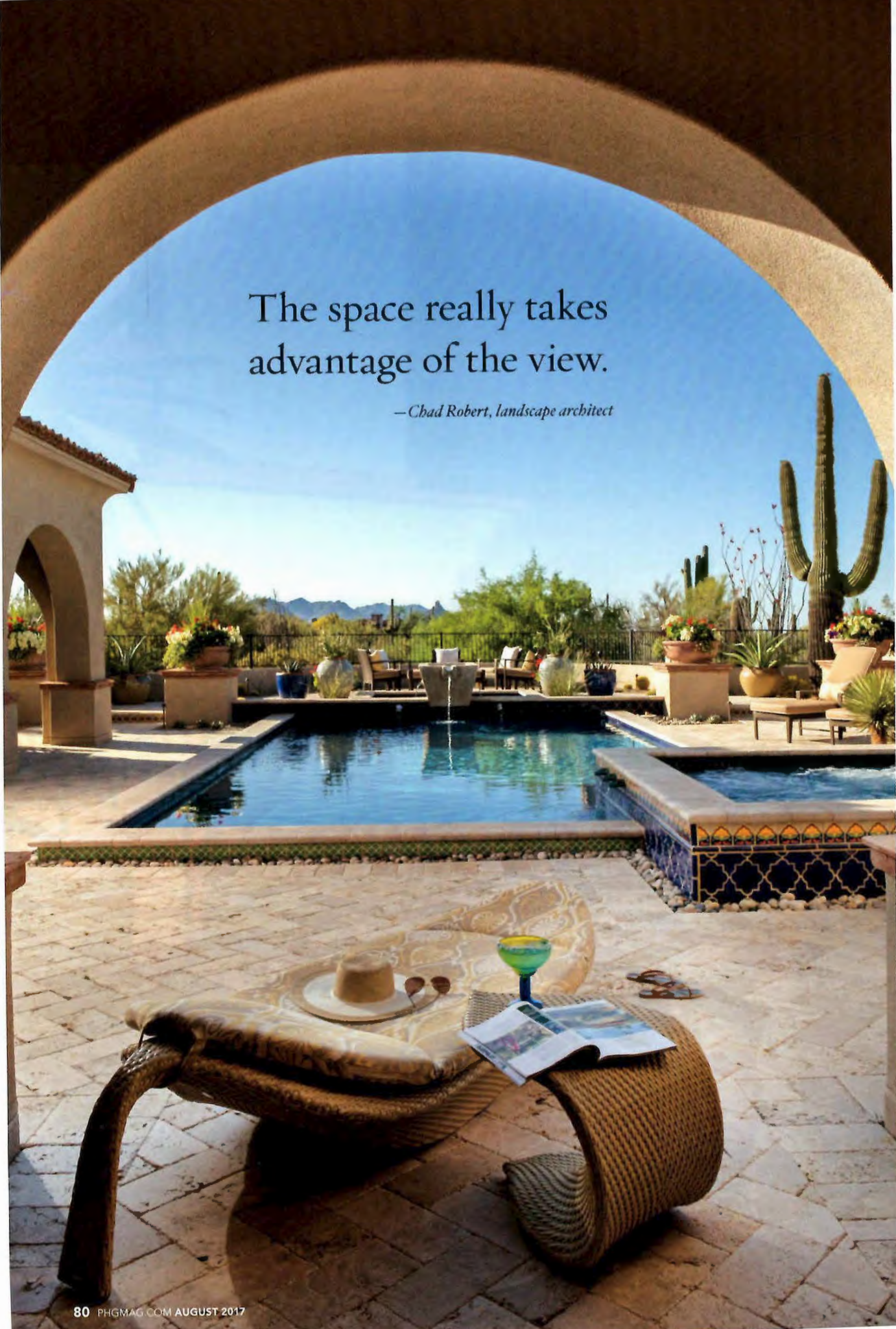
The courtyard was upgraded with pots filled with colorful blooms and an array of comfortable furnishings. The entry door was replaced with a more stylish version, and a tiled raised step was added.



We walked in and immediately knew that this was the one.

—Jordan Ayan, homeowner





The space really takes
advantage of the view.

—Chad Robert, landscape architect



OPPOSITE: Robert designed a troughlike water feature at the far end of the pool to serve as a focal point of the yard. Guests can soak in the views from a leaf-shaped lounger.

ABOVE: Prior to renovation, the backyard ended just beyond the pool. Robert expanded the patio and added a cozy seating area and firepit, creating an ideal spot for enjoying desert sunsets.

“The report said something along the lines of the trenches being large enough to hold a 2-ton forklift,” Jan says. “I thought, ‘I don’t think this is the kind of stuff designed to go around a house.’”

Determined to find a landscape designer with the skill of an architect, the Ayans came across the work of Chad Robert, a *Phoenix Home & Garden* Masters of the Southwest award winner. According to Jan, the trio connected right away.

“He has a Southern, relaxed style and doesn’t rattle easily,” she says. “Considering the gravity of the project, we wanted to make sure everything was done correctly. Like us, he wasn’t willing to take any shortcuts.”

Robert confirmed the home’s grading issues. “The ground was high for code,” he says. “Plus, there wasn’t adequate drainage, and the water didn’t have anywhere to go. The solution was to lower the grade and install drainage that was both functional and aesthetically pleasing.”

To lower the grade, all the pavers in the backyard, as well as 6 inches of dirt, were removed. “It was a tremendous amount of work,” Jan says. “Because of our location, no equipment could be brought in. For two weeks, a crew hand-dug the dirt and removed it with a wheelbarrow.” A trench was dug around the pool, and drains were installed to lead the water out to a wash in the desert.

Water problems also plagued the courtyard, where the Ayans discovered that an exquisite wall fountain just inside the entryway was leaking behind the tilework. The feature was torn down and rebuilt in the same shape but with new stone coping, Mexican tile in fresh patterns and vibrant colors, and elaborate stone bowls that were designed and handcarved in Mexico.

Once the drainage and water issues were resolved, Robert went to work on the landscape’s overall design. To create space and flow, he removed an existing stucco wall at the far end of

We love spending every moment we can outside.

—Jordan Ayan, homeowner



Robert designed a simple yet stunning water feature inspired by an antique farmhouse water trough. Handcarved in Mexico, the fountain replaces a decorative dividing wall at the far end of the pool.



BEFORE & AFTER GALLERY



the pool and replaced it with a custom-designed stone basin fountain.

“The main focal point in the backyard is this simple water feature, which doesn’t detract from the views but instead adds visual interest,” says Robert. “It’s designed to look like an old trough from a farm. We antiqued it a little bit to give it an aged feeling. I wanted it to create a sense of wonder and mystery that makes it more interesting.”

Colorful Mexican tile was used throughout the property. In the backyard, it replaced the original Cantera stone around the hot tub and along the waterline of the pool. The plaster inside the pool, which was rusting and stained, was swapped with a vibrant glass bead aggregate finish, which gives the water a brilliant blue color.

“We took a lot of inspiration from Spanish and Mediterranean styles. The pool area is reminiscent of the Courtyard of the Lions,” says Robert, referring to the main courtyard of the Palace of the Lions in the heart of Alhambra, a Moorish citadel in Granada, Spain.

Robert also added an elevated seating area—complete with fire pit—that extended the patio beyond the pool an additional 10 feet into the desert beyond. “The space really takes advantage of the views,” he says.

When it came time to add greenery to the expansive hardscape, Jan hoped to fill the outdoor spaces with a variety of colors and textures, from the softness of the flowers to the hard features of water-wise desert plants. “We wanted to be mindful of water usage,” she says. To achieve the look and feel the homeowners desired, Robert incorporated a variety of large colorful pots in



ABOVE: Referring to their renovated backyard as “Camp Solstice,” the Ayans consider it a retreat where they can relax, entertain and spend time with friends and family. The outdoor kitchen and dining area, with tile accents and a cozy fireplace, gives the space year-round appeal.

ABOVE LEFT: In the entry courtyard, a tiled inset is complemented by a stone planter that contains African spear plants and begonias.

BOTTOM LEFT: A focal point of the courtyard, an ornate fountain was given a fresh facelift with colorful Mexican tile, stone coping and decorative bowls.

RIGHT: Large planters play a significant role in the backyard design. A variety of shapes, colors and textures—seen in both the pots and their inhabitants—adds visual interest throughout the landscape.

See Sources.



the backyard. “Although the grading issues were resolved, standing water against the house continued to be a concern. Using the pots minimizes that problem,” he explains. “Plus, they go with the Spanish-Mediterranean style of the home.”

Pots are also important in the courtyard, where Robert filled them with dianella, also called flax lilies, and annuals. “They give the courtyard a softer feel,” he says. “It’s a more colorful and inviting entry.”

Completing the look are the desert plantings in front of the home, which include Moroccan mound, desert spoon, desert sage, senita cactus, red yucca and lantana.

The project took 14 months to complete and was, at times, tedious and painful, says Jordan. “We kind of look at it as us taking lemons and turning them into lemonade. Today, we absolutely love the way the house looks and feels. We have a home we’re very comfortable in, and we love spending every moment we can outside.” ■