A new garden has taken its place in the firmament of delightful spots for plant fans to visit in our region. It’s the Desert Garden at McMenamins Anderson School, in Bothell. It features a striking plant display that goes beyond any “drought-tolerant” garden I have seen. The uncommon plant offerings and textural combinations spark the imagination. While visiting the Anderson School campus, be sure to check out the wildflower meadow and kitchen garden, too.

McMenamins is a Portland, Oregon–based company (www.mcmenamins.com) known for turning historic properties into hotel and restaurant establishments, often surrounded by intriguing grounds and gardens. The mastermind behind the Desert Garden and its initial plant selection was Erich Petschke, McMenamins’ corporate gardens manager (based in Portland), who aimed for a diverse plant palette appropriate to the open, fully exposed site.

Riz Reyes, the Anderson School’s gardens manager—and a former horticulturist at the UW’s Center for Urban Horticulture—brought the vision to life and provides ongoing care. Riz started working at the Anderson School in August of 2015 and began planting the garden shortly before the grand opening in October of that year.

The garden has become very popular with guests, who are surprised to see cacti and agaves growing outside, year–round in the Pacific Northwest.

I visited the garden and spoke to Riz in the fall of last year.

Phil: How do you pull off a garden like this?

Riz: The first challenge was having to do a fall installation with plants that do not like cold or wet conditions; it was essential to provide excellent drainage throughout. The existing soil at the Desert Garden location—rocky, compacted, and disturbed by construction—was broken up and amended with several yards of pumice, worked in to a depth of 18 inches. Then the site was graded to create high and low areas, keeping in mind that the soil would settle considerably. Following the first round of planting, we top-dressed the site with crushed granite.

Phil: What plants have proved to be good, hardy performers?

Riz: The Mexican Agave ovatifolia (whale tongue agave) is our largest and most imposing species, and it’s showing little or no winter
damage, even after this year’s Snowmageddon. The iconic, tree-like *Yucca rostrata* (beaked yucca)—from the deserts of Texas and northern Mexico—has proved reliable and looks fabulous, especially if you can afford a large specimen that already has a trunk. Native to New Mexico, *Opuntia cyclodes* (hardy prickly pear) is another iconic desert plant that’s hardy here and can form large, imposing clumps best situated away from paths and trails.

*Muhlenbergia reverchonii* (ruby muhly), from Texas and Oklahoma, is also a reliable muhly grass for the Pacific Northwest, sporting clouds of pale pink in early autumn. *Seseli gummiferum* (moon carrot) is an intriguing biennial or short-lived perennial native to the Crimea, with dramatic umbels of white flowers on top of ferny, silvery foliage.

*Penstemon kunthii* from Mexico offers brightly colored, continuously blooming, coral-pink flowers, and it politely reseeds. The California native *Monardella odoratissima* (mountain coyote mint) is like a dwarf bee balm that stays under one foot tall and produces heads of pink-clustered flowers atop very aromatic foliage.

*Colletia hystrix* (crucifixion thorn) is a spiny, almost leafless, bushy shrub from Chile that grows up to nine feet tall and wide and bears tiny, fragrant white flowers in late summer.

**Phil:** Is everything in the garden hardy?

**Riz:** Not everything. I plant *Aeonium*, *Echeveria* and a few other non-hardy species each year for summer interest.
only and then dig them up for winter storage. We have also been trying out a new series of plants called “Mangave,” which are intergeneric hybrids between *Agave* and *Manfreda*.

**Phil:** What plants did suffer winter damage this year?

**Riz:** A few younger agaves did not survive. There were some broken branches on *Colletia hystrix*. The weight of the snow broke several pads off prickly pears (*Opuntia* species). Cold, wet weather will cause cosmetic damage to a few of these plants, but most will recover.

**Phil:** What advice do you have for readers who would like to create their own desert garden?

**Riz:** Begin by devoting a small space and bring in pumice and crushed rock to amend and raise a planting bed. Invest in a few larger specimen plants and supplement with younger treasures as you add onto your desert garden. A desert garden in a large container is also attainable, but make sure it dries out completely and drains perfectly. Plant small bulbs that are adapted to summer-dry periods for early interest and pops of color—for example, *Triteleia*, *Tulipa* species, short *Allium* species, and *Crocus*.

Most desert gardens tend to be very architectural and specimen driven, but we take a somewhat naturalistic approach by allowing plants to spread and seed around. A batch of *Viola tricolor* (Johnny jump-up pansies) found its way into the Desert Garden, blooming in winter and into early spring, and *Eschscholzia californica* (California poppy) has generously seeded itself. This only is effective in a larger setting; smaller desert gardens naturally tend to be tidier.

Gardeners can develop their own plant list by visiting gardens and local plant sales with vendors that specialize in dry gardens, drought tolerance, and “mini” plants, such as alpines that stay very low growing and can survive harsh environments. Since most desert plantings are small, scale is something to consider. Dry gardening is often an experiment, but starting out simply and then building on what works is the best approach.

**Phil:** Any nurseries and nursery folk you care to recommend?

**Riz:** Resources to check out include Ian Barclay at The Desert Northwest in Sequim (www.desertnorthwest.com), Sean Hogan at Cistus Nursery near Portland (www.cistus.com), and Paul Bonine and Greg Shepherd at Xera Plants in Portland (see their great blog at https://xeraplants.com).

For information and directions to the Anderson School, visit www.mcmenamins.com/anderson-school. To see the Desert Garden, enter the property from Bothell Way and look for the garden on the right side, just past the Northshore Lagoon.

**Phil Wood** is a garden designer and writer and serves on the “Arboretum Bulletin” Editorial Board.