



Digging Deep-Gardening with Cynthia Brian

Romancing the Stone

“When all the water has gone, only the largest stones will still remain in the riverbed.” –African proverb



If you want color around your river, nasturtium, dahlia, petunia, and baby roses brighten the landscape.

Fifty-eight percent of California is now experiencing exceptional drought conditions considered by experts to be worse than the droughts of 1924 and 1977. If we have learned anything from our state history, it is that water is a precious commodity. There is not enough water to subsidize our landscapes and many people are wondering how we can win the fight to minimize our usage of H₂O and still have an attractive garden. One solution is to romance the stone.

I'm not talking about replacing your landscaping with the tacky white gravel of the '70s, but instead installing an arroyo seco or dry creek which works not only as an alternative to a water feature, but becomes a useable water way when winter rains finally fall. Also called a rain garden, a dry brook will absorb and filter storm water preventing flooding, contamination, and soil erosion in winter while looking beautiful in the dry summer months.

Building a Dry Creek or Arroyo Seco

To be effective, a completed arroyo seco needs to mimic a small flowing river so that it is not only esthetically pleasing but can structurally channel run off water to an area where you need it. The finished goal is to have it look as natural as possible. In nature, streams twist, turn, and

curve, formed by a mixture of large river rocks, big boulders, smaller pebbles, driftwood, and plants.

Before you begin, ask yourself a few questions:

Why do you want an arroyo seco?

What are your expectations for the results?

Where is the optimum location?

How long and how wide will it be?

Will it work with the overall style of your home and current landscaping?

Will it have to be engineered or is this a DIY project?

How much can you budget?

Steps for DIY

Building a dry creek is remarkably simple. You may need some help with labor and lifting, but the rest is a pleasurable do-it-yourself project.

1. Observe natural creeks or streams. Take lots of photos. You'll notice that they don't follow any pattern, but meander.
2. Begin and end in an area that could realistically be a creek bed.
3. Determine the size, making sure to make some areas are wider and that the flow is sloping downhill.

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A dry creek planted with sage, lavender, and New Zealand Flax.