

# On the wild side

*Perched on the coast of the Caribbean island of Nevis,*

*Linda Burkett's garden is packed with tough,  
native plants chosen to reflect its rugged surroundings*

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Native agaves planted at dramatic intervals create an eye-catching architectural focus.



When Linda Burkett first saw Black Sand Cove, on the desolate west coast of Nevis, it felt to her like the edge of the known world. The house stood in the middle of scrub that had been overgrazed for years by feral donkeys and goats, while the ferocious sea that dominates the property was tearing into the cliffs. “But I loved its isolation,” she says, “and although I would only call myself a casual gardener, I knew I wanted a garden that reflected this extreme wildness.”

By coincidence, the award-winning British garden designer Julie Toll was working on another garden on the island. They met and Linda, a retired psychologist from Minneapolis, could not have found someone more in tune with her thinking. “I told her I was interested in prairie gardening and the use of perennials and grasses to create a natural-looking landscape,” she says. “Julie said that she had used that style for her seaside garden, which won Gold at Chelsea in 1993, yet it had generated complaints because people said she had ‘just used weeds’. I knew then that she was the right person for me to work with.”

Linda’s two homes could not be more dissimilar. “Minneapolis is surrounded by thousands of square miles of land, while Black Sand Cove is encompassed by the sea,” she says. The latter is also in the lee of Mount Nevis (see *Destinations*, page 209), a dormant volcano which broods over the garden. Most Caribbean gardens are extensions of the house, with neat well-watered lawns and cheerful hibiscus, oleander and bougainvillea. Black Sand Cove by contrast is a continuation of the rugged landscape – not a green lawn in sight and minimal watering.

Linda welcomed Julie’s radical ideas of using native plants, such as aloe and agave, that could survive the hard living conditions of her



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** Near the main house, seen here from the now-abandoned coast road, native grass is kept long and, save for a path, mown just once a year; lava streams hacked out of the rock have been planted with native yellow-flowered aloes and *Kalanchoe daigremontiana* (mother of millions) to mimic the arid slopes of nearby Mount Nevis; *Stapelia gigantea* (giant milkweed), gathered by Linda and Julia from the wild, produces spectacular starfish-shaped flowers; the spires of yellow aloes are magnets to visiting hummingbirds; a driftwood gate, with the sea beyond, keeps out feral donkeys.

garden. The pair went on foraging expeditions to the scrubby land beyond Linda’s property and brought back seeds, seedlings and ideas. When Julie suggested that the grass should be cut just once a year and paths be mown through it instead, the islanders just shrugged and said it would only attract rats and look untidy. Now the grass defines the garden; its colour, a mixture of smoky purple and gold, flares in the setting sun and it is always in motion, like an animal’s fur in the wind.

When Linda first arrived on the island, a test of the garden’s soil revealed that it was starved of nutrients and that hundreds of years of sugar-cane growing had left the land sterile. Added to this, composting and mulching are virtually unheard of on Nevis, so the soil is never replenished and the habit of sweeping everything up gave rise to Julie’s mantra when creating the garden: “Don’t make it too tidy.”

The two women are less client and designer than experimenters and explorers, trying out new places for plants and trees and, unusually for a designer, Julie goes back to Black Sand Cove many times a year. She weighs up what has worked and what has not, shaping the garden as she goes along. In a patch of native grasses, she has seeded milkweed (*Stapelia gigantea*), a staple of the magnificent monarch butterflies that stop over on their mass migration between the Gulf of Mexico and Canada, while iridescent green and purple hummingbirds streak through the garden like electricity to feed off the flowering aloe.

A path, the remains of a beaten-up road, runs along the bottom of Black Sand Cove, where walkers can often be seen in the morning, when the light is golden. They stand and stare, astonished that in all this harsh scrub something so seemingly natural can flourish. One, who dropped by, wrote in the visitor’s book recently: “Paradise found.”



ILLUSTRATION SCOTT JESSOP

## Garden guide

**ORIENTATION** Coastal garden in the driest part of the tiny island of Nevis.  
**SOIL** Heavy clay, stony and extremely arid. Subject to salty winds and flash floods.  
**FEATURES** Tough native

plants such as agave and aloe reduce the need for watering and attract wildlife.  
**GARDEN DESIGN** Julie Toll, julietoll.co.uk.  
**TO SEE THE GARDEN** Visit blacksandcove.com. ■