

# PHOENIX HOME & GARDEN

*The Magazine of Southwest Living*

## COLOR PLAY

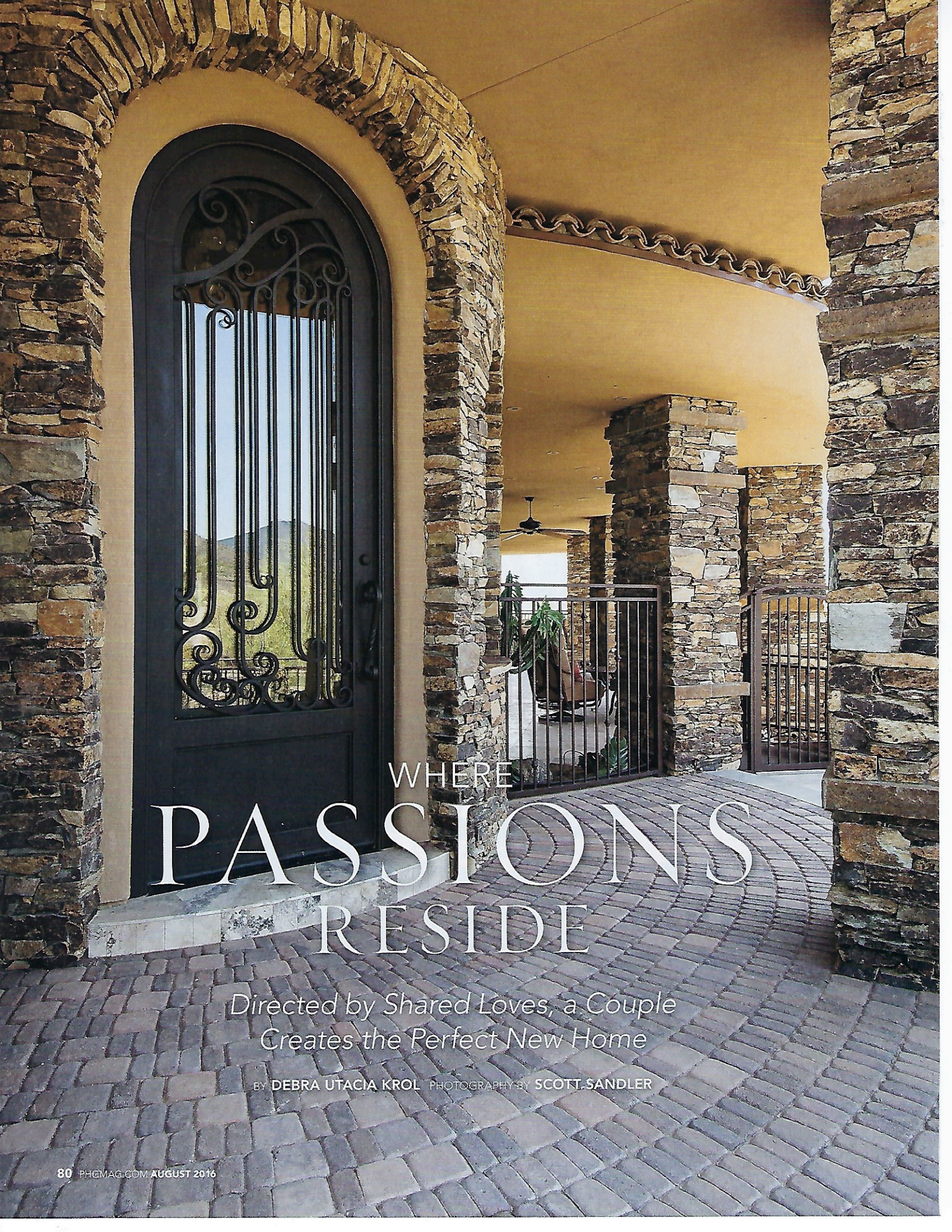
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*Directed by Shared Loves, a Couple  
Creates the Perfect New Home*

BY DEBRA UTACIA KROL PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT SANDLER



The homeowners' love of handcrafted furnishings is reflected in the custom-made table in their breakfast area. It features a live-edge walnut top milled from a lighting-struck tree and three copper-clad metal legs that resemble giant, interlaced bracelets.

## MANY VALLEY HOUSES ARE OFTEN HOME

to others besides their primary owners. Family comes for holidays and reunions, and friends for evening dinners or weekend fun. But the home of one Desert Mountain husband and wife had to go one step further to also shelter and entertain the family's pets. Actually, they're more like family members, as Little Tookie has been with the couple for 42 years and Green Bean for 15. Both are turtles. The wife explains that she purchased Little Tookie at a dime store and with tender loving care, he grew from a couple inches long to his present 6-inch size. Nine-inch Green Bean came along later from a turtle rescue facility.

The unique need to house the red-eared slider testudines—added to a long list of must-haves that included a gourmet kitchen, large wine cellar, backyard oasis and multiple guest rooms—directed the couple's 10-year building project that ultimately gave them an abode perfectly suited to their specific desires and life-long passions.

The couple engaged interior designer Debra May Himes to help them through the maze of construction and decorating decisions. "One reason the home took so long to build is that we participated so deeply in the process," says the wife. "It was all customized according to our tastes, including Debra's taste. We wanted to see everything with Debra and the artisans as a team, to work it all out together."

The family room, which is adjacent to the kitchen and breakfast area, features Sedona stone accents, a hand-scraped walnut floor and majestic custom urns hand-thrown and fired by Chandler-based ceramist Joseph Woodford.





One space, in particular, got special attention. The large family room, central both to the home's floor plan and functionality, is also where Green Bean and Little Tookie and reside most of the time. Their matching 125-gallon freshwater habitats, incorporated seamlessly into one of the room's two walls, are sited at eye level for easy viewing. The two tanks look like art, but when one or both of the turtles move, that illusion is lost and you're drawn toward them for a closer look.

"The turtles are definitely part of the family," says Himes. So much so that they are often given free rein of the house. As such, safety for the hard-shelled family members was at the forefront of the home's design. For example, the living room fireplace hearth was raised during planning stages to prevent the turtles from crawling up onto it.

This all seems extraordinary for two reptiles. But wait, there's more. An outdoor habitat specially constructed for Little Tookie and Green Bean is truly one-of-a-kind. Serving as the focal point of the couple's back courtyard, the custom-designed space includes separate spaces for each turtle with grassy areas, ponds with sandy edges, cascading water features and plantings. Here, too, safety was a concern. "We had to ensure that the fencing in their outdoor zone was tight enough to keep them inside," says Himes.


The garden has become its own ecosystem. "There are minnows in the pond to take care of the mosquitoes. Also, there are snails, which the turtles like to eat," says the husband. "The minnows



**RIGHT:** What turtle wouldn't love frolicking in this lush landscape? The homeowners also enjoy spending time in this desert oasis, even on sultry summer days when their shelled friends need to stay indoors.

**TOP RIGHT:** Green Bean and Little Tookie each reside in their own tanks. A red stripe on the wall above their tanks adds a touch of whimsy, while cleverly designed doors hide the turtles' food, supplies and filters.





The turtles are definitely part of the family, and the design ensures that they are included in family life.

—Debra May Himes, interior designer

Interior designer Debra May Himes worked with the family to create a casual yet elegant look. In the family room, natural materials and a neutral color scheme let the turtles' habitats and the backyard garden just beyond shine.



**ABOVE:** The formal living room features a large fireplace with a raised hearth, a curved ceiling with indirect lighting and an intimate conversation area for the family.

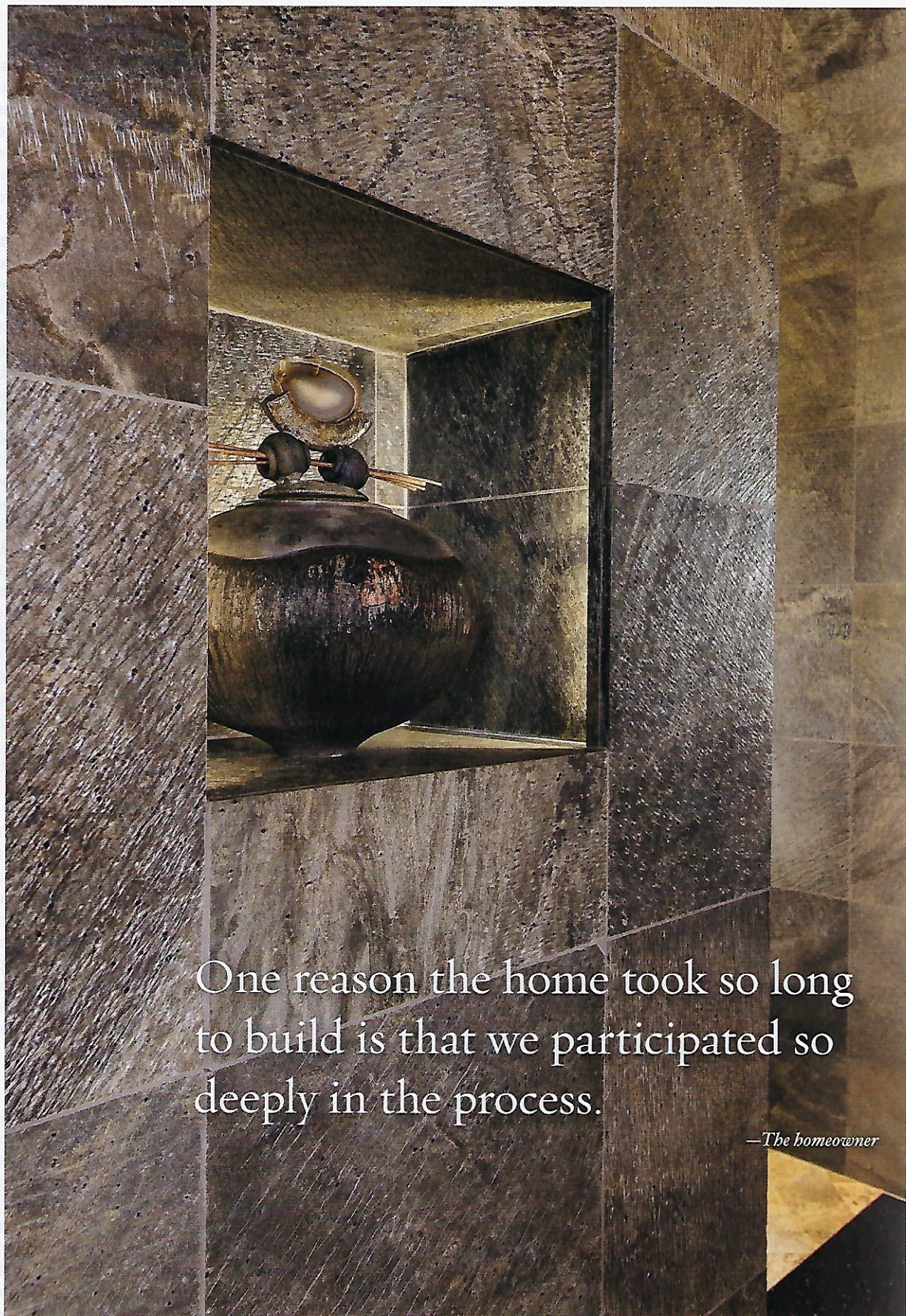
**RIGHT:** The bar is tucked into one corner of the living room so family and friends can enjoy their favorite refreshment in the living room or take it into the kitchen or dining room.







Custom pottery is prominently displayed in the backlit niches of the arched wall that embellishes the living room and frames the entrance to the adjacent kitchen.



One reason the home took so long to build is that we participated so deeply in the process.

—The homeowner

**RIGHT:** This cleverly designed spice rack keeps the wife's collection of more than 100 spices organized and close to hand.



used to avoid the turtles, but now they're hanging around so they can pick up any residue that's left over after the turtles crunch the snails' shells." The pond is also visited by toads, who, as the couple laughingly share, "seemingly placed a neon sign out front that says 'beachfront property.'"

When summer's hot temperatures require Little Tookie and Green Bean to be indoors, the environ is still beautiful and calming for humans. The husband enjoys smoking a cigar there in the evening and observing the critters who come in search of water to quench their thirst. "The patio is a very relaxing place." The wife agrees. "Living here in the Southwest is so much fun," she says. "It's such a pleasure to observe all the wildlife out back."

The couple also take great pleasure in the home's large and well-appointed kitchen. The wife is a talented baker and cake decorator, and the husband is also an avid cook, so the kitchen was designed for both to be working there at the same time. Three distinct zones accommodate their avocations: One corner is dedicated to baking, another to food prep and a third to cooking. The work triangle between the refrigerator, sink and range is positioned so traffics flows around it rather than through it.

Another passion that called for customization is the husband's fine wine collection. "The wine room holds more than 2,000 bottles, and it's full," says the wife. Himes worked to provide the right scale and style for the large wine cellar, which is adjacent to the family's casual dining area and entered via a handcrafted wood, glass and metal door. That door is also just a bit different than what you'd normally find in a custom home. "We have colored glass inserts that resemble the bottoms of wine bottles in our door," the wife continues. "We like unexpected things that have a twist to them."

The couple's love of customized elements is also a theme throughout the home. The dining table, for instance, is as artistic as it is functional. Its dramatic live-edge walnut top is supported by a handmade, bracelet-like copper-clad metal base. It was created by artisan Brian Szczech, as was the stunning metal-and-wood vanity in the powder room. Large custom vessels created by Chandler ceramist Joseph Woodford flank the large-screen TV in the family room.

Builder Brian Rives, who also was part of the team who designed and constructed the unique home, enjoys stopping by for a visit with the family now that the project is complete. "The couple wanted a house that is spacious but not cavernous," he says. "It also flows well. It's easy to move from one side of the home to the other."

"We love the house," the couple says. "This is the only time we're going to build a custom home, so we wanted it to be just right for all of us." Green Bean and Little Tookie seem to agree. ■



A custom, traditional-style built-in hutch holds crystal serving pieces and complements the warmer brown hues of the butler's pantry.

The couples' shared love of cooking and her interest in baking and cake decorating necessitated a kitchen that was both large and carefully planned. Hardworking yet beautiful, the space welcomes family and guests for snacks, drinks or conversation.







**OPPOSITE:** The wine room, tucked behind a custom glass and iron-decorated door, is lit to show off the arched ceiling as well as the substantial inventory.

**LEFT:** The powder room features a metal-and-wood custom vanity with subtle undermount lighting that highlights the colors and textures of the base.

*See Sources.*