



Extreme Makeover's Eduardo Xol

TV's popular Latin-pop-star-turned-garden-guru talks trends, design inspiration and much more with *Garden Chic*.

WRITTEN BY SHANE PLISKA

GARDENING HAS A NEW DARLING, and it isn't a Martha Stewart TV clone or Price Charles bumbling at High Grove. Eduardo Xol (pronounced "Soul"), a former pop music and soap star in Latin America, is the inspirational garden designer on ABC's *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. The reality TV hit consists of tear-jerking episodes where the homes of the disabled and needy are decorated by *Extreme Makeover's* design team.

Last fall, the show won an Emmy for Outstanding Reality Program - not bad for a prime-time show that inspires homeowners to improve their properties, not to mention their yards. If you think the CBS *Survivor* se-

ries is good for tiki torch sales, the attention Xol brings to home gardening is likely to produce an extra boost.

In addition to being a TV star, Xol operates his garden design firm, Xol: Design, based in Beverly Hills. The three-year-old company works on projects ranging from backyard makeovers and balcony retreats to multi-million-dollar estates. Xol has four employees, including a strong associate designer who manages projects while Xol tapes episodes out of town.

In an exclusive interview with *Garden Chic* the day after Emmy night, Xol talked about garden trends, design inspirations and much more.

How have you seen home garden design trends change?

Most [homeowners] have become more aware of exterior design. There is a movement toward people wanting to become more connected to nature. It is no longer a “front yard” and a “back yard” - now people are actually creating “outdoor rooms.”

On the West Coast especially, where the weather is so nice, the outdoor room is very popular. This is most often occurring in renovations. On new homes, the developer always places more emphases on the front landscape to generate curb appeal; the same is true for those who renovate a flip. But I am seeing that buyers are enclosing their yards, even front yards, for personal living space.

What is your favorite garden accessory?

I am always in favor of elements that stimulate the senses - water, windchimes and statuary - and that are special to the homeowner.

But inexpensive biodegradable rugs are my favorite. Change it out seasonally and during raining seasons, and get rid of it. I don't like rugs made out of synthetic materials. I prefer natural fibers that age beautifully and feel more comfortable.

What about garden gnomes?

Gnomes are wonderful if they are special to the homeowner. I'd like to carry that theme and extend it inside, too. A lot of people see a disconnect between the inside and the outside but I don't. I see the outside and inside as being one in the same.

What's in style?

Treating your garden as a room is hot. I am also seeing more carpets, candleabra, lanterns, vases, coffee tables, candles, outdoor sound systems and even big-screen TVs made for the outdoors.

It's all about what you want that space to be. You've got to ask yourself, is the grass going to be your rug or do you want a different kind of rug? What colors are you going to use? If you are going to create a living space with loveseats and a coffee table, what are you going to place on the coffee table?

What's on its way out?

Stagstone and flagstone are starting to become way overused. As an element, I feel like they're burned out.

Wrought iron furniture is also burned out. I know a lot of people like iron for the maintenance, but I tend to recommend wood instead. Good wood furniture, such as teak, is worth it in the long run.

Ficus are overused, especially on the West Coast. There are so many other trees.

What is your personal style?

My influences are Hispanic and Asian design and art. My parents are from Mexico, and I used to travel to Latin America and live there. I also grew up in a neighborhood that is adjacent to a community of Japanese Americans. I was exposed to their style of design and landscaping. I combine these ethnicities with everything.

What would be an example of your ethnic combinations?

I would design a small, minimalist gar-

den with gravel, water and rectangular planters, Japanese style. Then, I would surround the garden with lush, multi-colored bougainvilleas. The combination achieves simplicity, wrapped in color.

What role does color play in home garden design?

It plays a huge role, especially now that people are more conscious of color, inside and outside the home. I take color from inside the home and pull those pallets outside. This selection depends on the region and the style of the house. Style dictates color.

Julia Child always insisted she is a cook, not a chef. Do you consider yourself a designer or gardener?

Because of my experience with my company and show, I can now comfortably call myself a designer. Even before I was given that title, my true identity comes straight from my experience as a composer. I have been a composer for most of my life, and I can take musical compositions and apply them to my design. I can deal with the harmonic and dissident.

I equate the similarities to seeing music in color. Sometimes colors makes sense together, sometimes they don't. Music and color are the same thing.

Where do you find inspiration?

From the people and clients I work with: who they are as people, what they are looking for, what they need. That inspires me.

What is the most memorable garden you've designed on *Extreme Makeover*?

Without a doubt, Jamie Dolan's home in St. Petersburg, FL. He had been shot in the head by a random person and lost his sight. We were given the challenge to redesign a space that would help him in his new lifestyle and help him reclaim his independence.

For me, it meant I needed to design the garden for the senses. I closed my eyes and walked around. I also had help from a designer who is blind. Apparently, we were all on the right track.

We used water, windchimes and other sounds to direct him by applying different hardscapes. We did the same inside, such as textured wall coverings. We also used scented plants and flowers to help guide him.

You also operate a garden design business. What designs are you working on now?

Xol: Designs started out as Xol Creative, and I've split the design aspect of my business into a separate company. I've had my company for about three years. Inquiries come from as far away as Canada and Australia.

I'm currently working on a project in Orange County, CA, designing a special area for the client's children. We are treating their children as if they are adults, putting them through the exact same processes, conceptualizing with them, making drawings for them to ap-

prove and getting them involved in the kinds of plants and environments they want. It's wonderful, I love working with kids!

What is it that children notice that adults tend to overlook?

Kids like bugs and animals and environments that support their ability to explore. For [the Orange County client], I am making environments where lizards and reptiles might be able to live. I'm also using plants that attract butterflies and hummingbirds. Girls love butterflies!

This is the first time we are introducing animals and insects into the garden.

Do you have any favorite brands or products?

No. I am not someone who is totally fixed on a single brand or product. I like to try things out.

What's next?

Lifestyle design/living - not specific to interior or exterior but working with people and creating an environment for their lifestyle.

I am hoping to get into the design of



furniture and accessories. That will be the next progression.

Also, beginning in December, I will contribute to *People En Espanol*, writing a monthly column on lifestyle and design.

Did you ever think you'd go from Latin pop star to a landscaping guru on an Emmy Award-winning show?

I didn't. Everything happens for a reason. It all makes sense to me now. Gardening is not new; I got it from my family, my parents. Nature is special to me, and I've always been connected to it. ■