

Bringing nature back to garden

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Published Tuesday, May 11, 2010



Drought-tolerant landscaping, also known as xeriscaping or dry landscaping, is a practical response to California's perennial droughts and environmental concerns. Scott Flournoy of Oxnard decided to embrace practicality, replacing the lawn in his front yard with drought-tolerant plants. "About three years ago I saw an article in the newspaper about a tour of native gardens in Los Angeles, and I started thinking saving water made a lot of sense. I looked at the cactus and rock and was stunned at how beautiful these yards were," said Flournoy, a fourth-grade teacher at Rose Avenue School in Oxnard. So he contacted the Theodore Payne Foundation for Wildflowers and Native Plants Inc., a Sun Valley firm that "promotes the understanding and preservation of California native flora," according to its website. Flournoy was referred to Jennifer Lowe, a landscape architect and owner of Darsaya Studios in Woodland Hills. She was hired to transform the Flournoy front yard with its standard-issue birch trees, dusty miller and agapanthus into a drought-tolerant landscape that would incorporate native plants.

According to Lisa Burton of Nature by Design in Ventura, the drought-tolerant native plant design movement, which is her specialty, is not only trendy, but it is also the right thing to do. "I always put it, lawns are great for kids, dogs and recreation, but beyond that they serve no purpose. They only take from the environment. They contribute nothing," she said. "One thing about installing gardens instead of lawns is creating wildlife habitats that contribute to supporting the ecosystem. There would be a cumulative effect if everyone converted to gardens." Burton predicts that in 10 years lawns will have gone the way of CDs, VCRs and other antiquated ideas.

Flournoy, who shares his spacious home with his wife, Martha, and two dogs, had already transformed his backyard into an eclectic space that contains native plants with white rock and cactus as well as other native plants designed to attract the birds and the bees. There are a couple of water features, although the back third of the yard is undeveloped because Flournoy plans eventually to build a train set there, he said with a twinkle. Because they enjoyed the backyard so much, the Flournoys decided to renovate their front yard. While some homeowners associations have balked at drought-tolerant landscaping, Flournoy said he and Lowe presented the plans directly to the board to win its approval. With some initial reservations, the board agreed to the renovation.

The first thing Lowe did was to remove the birch trees, which, she said, are meant for more temperate climates with more rainfall and colder weather. In Southern California the trees struggle. Lowe said her approach to creating a garden is to try to distill the essence of the owner and his or her home in the landscape. "I want the spirit of the client to shine through and reflect the house," Lowe said. "I'm an artist first. I don't want to use the Home Depot top 20 plants." With the help of landscape contractor Scott Yonkers, she has installed toyon tree saplings, which grow wild in California as a shrub but can reach 8 feet with proper pruning. Lowe said she was able to find a variety with yellow berries, rather than the orange/red berries normally seen on the bushes, because the yellow will go better with the house. By adding boulders and creating hills and ravines in what had been a standard flat lawn, Lowe was better able to create a sense of natural landscaping, with hills and valleys, which adds to the overall esthetic of the design. "The lumps and berms create drainage that is crucial to the natives," she said.

The lawn still has an irrigation system, using both sprinklers and drip hoses to make sure the plants are properly watered. Lowe cautioned that just because a plant is labeled as "drought tolerant" doesn't mean it can live without water, especially as it becomes established in the soil. But, she said, once the plant is growing successfully, it can survive on far less water than non-native plants. Native plants also need almost no soil amendments. But the most appealing aspect is how such plants attract native wildlife, Lowe said, as she delightedly pointed to a yellow swallowtail butterfly that had been circling the garden as she planted irises and sage.

Burton cautioned against trying to create a native plant landscape without the help of an expert. "It really does take a designer's eye. I caution people because there is a lot of interest in native plants. But native plants, when you look in nature, they get big," she said. Ventura County can support a variety of plant life because of the temperate climate, making it difficult for the average home gardener to be familiar with everything that's available, she added. "There are so many plants we support here. ... It's daunting to try to learn about all of them," she said. "I'm still learning, but it is really daunting to figure it all out."

Flournoy's next-door neighbor Barbara Neale has also hired Lowe to redesign her yard. Flournoy said he and his wife are pleased with the finished yard, especially now that the water feature, which is made with natural rock, has been added. "We really, really like the direction it's taken," he said. Neighbors and passersby also like it. "What we have noticed is a number of people have walked by and have stopped and commented on what a nice job it is," Flournoy said. "We've had really positive comments from neighbors."