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A peek at local gardens gone wild

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As soon as temperatures warm and days grow longer, Bay Area residents seem compelled to get into their gardens and work. Off they go to local nurseries, browsing the aisles and selecting new plants to add to their landscape. Kathy Kramer hopes that many, if not all, of those new additions will be California natives and she's organized just the tour to serve as garden-inspiration.

The sixth annual Bringing Back the Natives Garden Tour will take place on May 2 and it promises to be a day filled with opportunities for ogling beautiful gardens, learning native plant craft and purchasing hard-to-find California natives.

The free, self-drive tour presents 50 gardens throughout Alameda and Contra Costa counties. Though ranging in size and scope, these low-maintenance gardens hold certain characteristics in common: They are pesticide-free and contain at least 50 percent native plants, which conserve water and serve as habitat for bees, butterflies and birds.

During the daylong tour, more than 40 talks will be offered instructing site assessment, planting natives under sunny and shade conditions and creating wildlife habitat. The companion event, the Native Plant Sale Extraordinaire, features a number of native plant nurseries that stock hard-to-find California natives.

Tour coordinator Kramer is a one-woman native plant force, spending 18 months on each tour.

"I solicit gardens, visit them, write the garden descriptions, do the fundraising, manage registration, do the promotion and more," she said. "I also maintain the Web site with the help of my husband, without whom the tour could not be run."

Kramer considers the time well spent and the tour a gardening eye-opener for many.

"I hope the tour helps people see that native plants are beautiful, interesting and worth including in their garden," she said.

The garden tour Web site has been set up as the perfect way to preview the gardens before the tour. There are photographs, descriptions and plant lists for each garden, as well as a listing of any plant talks that will occur at each location.

The 50 gardens are scattered across both Alameda and Contra Costa counties, from El Sobrante to Hayward and Albany to Livermore. They range from a 50-year-old collector's garden to some that are newly installed; from five acres to small plots; and from those designed and installed by owners to professionals.

Tim and Michelle Inama's garden in the Oakland Hills is a fine example of creating a native woodland landscape under an enormous front yard oak tree, where coral bells, bunchgrasses and sages thrive under dappled sunlight.

"When I knew I wanted to plant natives I took the Bringing Back the Natives Tour and found several gardens Michel Thilgen had done," Tim Inama said.

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"We contacted him and he was very excited to be working with a large oak. He asked what we wanted and came back with ideas."

Tim Inama wanted to plant natives in order to restore habitat and attract wildlife.

"When the sage blooms you can stand by it for 15 minutes and count 25 bees of five different species," he said. "The garden is low maintenance, provides habitat and you can see plants bloom at different parts of the year."

Kramer describes the May 2 tour as a gigantic mobile party. "People feel really happy about the tour. They get a beautiful garden guide and get to see beautiful gardens," she said.

Though Kramer does ask for donations to support the tour, it is important to her to keep it free.

"The tour has had 5,000 participants every year since year one and every year half are new people," she said. "That's what I want, people who don't already love native plants. I want to catch marginal people."

IF YOU GO WHAT: Bringing Back the Natives Garden Tour WHEN: May 2, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. COST: Admission is free but participants must register at www.bringingbackthenatives.net before April 20. Early registration is suggested.

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