**Shifting Perspectives on Native Plant Gardening**

Al Kyte - 2016

People bring different perspectives to their gardening, even people who grow only California native plants. Over time I have become aware of some of these perspectives, shifted my emphasis from one to another, and eventually incorporated them to some degree into what I do.

The perspective I started with in 1972 was a desire to **attract more birds** to our yard. “Planting California natives will bring them,” I was told. I knew from that moment I had found my gardening focus. Somehow I had never thought of surrounding myself with the types of plants I loved seeing when fly fishing, hiking, or backpacking in wild country. So native plants it would be.

I started a project-by-project transformation of our garden with some of California’s most beautiful shrubs and small trees, including manzanitas, ceanothus, toyon, bush poppy, woolly blue curls, redbud, vine maples, and shore pines. Compared to today, there were few plants in our nurseries that were native to any part of California, let alone our local region. Fortunately there were native plant sales, which introduced me to some additional species. The information provided there also added to my perspective the **need for water conservation,** which further narrowed my emphasis to **drought-tolerant natives.** For the first time, I heard about our mediterranean climate and the lack of sufficient water for our state’s various needs. Forty years and two major droughts later, most people still don’t seem to get it. Why does it require mandatory rationing and monetary incentives for us to act responsibly? At any rate, my first major project was to remove our “green sponge”—the lawn that took up 90 per cent of our front yard. Decades later, the manzanitas I planted in its place still provide year-around, evergreen appeal with wonderfully-twisted reddish trunks only adding to the beauty.

The concept of **organizing** **plantings** **around California habitats** further sharpened my focus. I had already begun doing this with the manzanitas in front having grown to form a type of chaparral. With the addition of other favorite chaparral plants and a consideration of plant succession, this “habitat” has become increasingly diversified and interesting.

The idea for a second habitat came from observing rain water drain from the backyard, down along one side of our house, and through the front yard. Reworking that landscape, meandering the channel, and selecting appropriate plants gave me a type of riparian habitat. We even added a stream and pond in back to suggest a water source for this intermittent stream.

Within a few years we had also replaced our back lawn with distinctive mounds, planted them with a mix of small trees, shrubs and wildflowers, and shaped that area into my favorite habitat for birding—an open, mixed woodland. Now instead of walking out into a typical yard, I can leave our house and find myself in natural-looking woodland or chaparral landscapes.

The abundance of fence lizards, ground-feeding birds, and gold fish has drawn predators to our yard and opened up my perspective to **attracting animals** as well. I built a tracking pit and, more recently, used a trail-cam to verify which large animals drop by.

When I heard of the “Bringing Back the Natives” tour, I had been gardening with natives for 30 years, so was able to offer plant variety and maturity seldom found at that time in a typical suburban lot. This tour alerted me to the **dangers of using pesticides,** which have contributed so heavily to **the loss of local butterflies** as well as other life forms**.** Studying these beautiful insects also allowed me to see the other factor so damaging to their survival—**the loss of natural habitat.** With this awareness came a sense of responsibility that I believe we have as gardeners—as well as human beings—to preserve and restore as much natural habitat as possible.

As I waited for butterflies to return to their favorite blooms, I began to notice other insects I didn’t recognize. This led to **the study of native bees,** which not only reinforced the importance of preserving habitat but also introduced me to the **urgent** **need to protect our primary pollinators.** I had no idea that there were 1600 species of native bees in the state, nor that a third of the food we eat depends on pollination primarily by bees, nor the extent to which the native bee population has already been decimated. So my selection of plants now includes many that local butterflies and bees are drawn to. Yet my nurseryman tells me of people who want flowers but not bees in their yard. Other than those allergic to bee stings, are these people who simply regard bees as a nuisance? If so, I wonder how open they are to seeing a broader picture of life.

Anyway, these concerns for habitat and local pollinators led naturally to another perspective, that of increasing percentages of **plants that are local** to the area in which we live. And with more native plant species now available to the gardener, it has become possible to design entire gardens with plants that are local natives. This ties in with another emerging perspective, that of **restoring previously-existing plant communities.** In an oak-lined canyon, it may not be difficult to sort out which plants previously grew there. However, in a gradually-sloping, open landscape, such as our Moraga location, the working of land by early ranchers and burning practices by the people who came before make it more difficult to envision what the landscape originally looked like. In the absence of such knowledge, I have tried to depict as attractively as possible the best of what I believe might have been seen where our house now stands.

This brought out **an artistic perspective,** a desire to find ways to bring together **naturalness and beauty.** I try to see our landscape through the eyes of a painter viewing his canvas. Composition for me started with the Japanese concept of maintaining a spacial balance between plant, rock, and water. Now I study the effects of various landscape elements, such as rock and slope, between each planting. I am continually looking to nature for fresh ways to do this.

So this garden has evolved through a growing awareness of various perspectives, each adding something. I have enjoyed the entire journey. However, it has taken me years. Educational programs, such as those provided through the Bringing Back the Natives Tour, now make it possible for someone new to this gardening to become aware of these perspectives, as well as some others, without such loss of time.

Our garden has been featured in a newsletter of a naturalist organization, and I have been able to exchange ideas with many visitors, including well-known photographers and authors, groups of designers and master gardeners, and naturalists with various specialties. Yet I have none of these credentials. I’m simply a person who has had a long-term commitment to planting our yard with California natives. I still keep some favorite plants from other areas of the state, partly because they allow me to show people a more beautiful, colorful garden than I could offer solely with local plants. Attractiveness is important to many gardeners, and typically to those who are considering planting natives for the first time. Although such color and beauty draw them in, some of these people will undoubtedly start embracing other teachings that emphasize local plants, soils and life forms.

I have learned that shifting perspectives is one way we grow. And I find hope in that.