

## Concepts That Guided My Landscaping

By Al Kyte

After moving to Moraga in 1972 and to a garden of grass, ivy, and juniper, I enrolled in a University of California Extension class on “Attracting Birds to your Yard.” There my eyes were first opened to the possibility of surrounding myself with the type of plants and habitat I loved to experience when fly fishing, back-packing or birding—California Native Plants. Instead of stepping out of our house into a garden, I could step out into the feel of a chaparral, woodland, or dry streambed.

As I began to transform our yard project by project, I read further about native plants as well as Japanese gardening and consulted with local experts—Glen Schneider, Phil Johnson, Wayne Roderick and Lester Hawkins. Almost 40 years later, I am still experimenting, learning, and enjoying. I have come to realize that my landscape has been molded by the interplay of certain concepts that have somehow become part of me.

### Selected Landscaping Concepts

1. Spacing. Japanese gardening has influenced me to maintain a balance between the space taken up by plants, rock and water (or the suggestion of water). Plants die and others grow and require pruning back or being removed to maintain this balance. So the design is dynamic—ever changing and evolving.
2. Sight Lines. I view our yard from obvious vantage points, such as from up and down the street, selected outdoor locations, and from inside the house. These primary sight lines become important reference angles from which to evaluate any proposed changes.
3. Reconstructing the Past. I like to think back to a time before houses were built on a location. Might this site have been a chaparral area, oak/pine woodland, savannah, mountain meadow, or riparian plant community? Rather than just putting in a lawn and plant border, I try to reconstruct the most attractive plant community that might have existed there. I have even tried to re-create a specific moment in the natural succession of plants in the wild.
4. Borrowing. The Japanese speak of “borrowing” from your neighbor’s landscape. Thus, if you see a tree you like near your property line, add a few similar native trees near it on your property and you create a habitat in which the neighbor’s tree appears to become part of your planting and property.
5. Contouring/Grading. Before planting, I like to rework the earth by adding soil and creating slope to improve drainage, mound above the clay soil, and create dramatic effect from the sight lines.

6. Degrees of Openness. I want areas of openness or access in the sense of having trees I can “see through” to the sky beyond and chaparral I can “see over” and “walk through” rather than have to step around. Yet I also want some closed areas where wildlife can find refuge from people and where private little nooks can exist.
7. Transition to Wilderness. As I move away from the house, I want the feeling of moving from civilized to wild. Paved pathways should give way to gravel, then dirt, and exotic plants give way to natives.
8. Internal Consistency. Much like a well-written composition, I want internal consistency in my landscape. Each plant and rock should contribute to the primary theme of the garden (native) as well as to the sub-theme (i.e. chaparral) of that part of the yard. Yet within that limitation, individual elements should offer some unique point of interest as well. This is the opposite of “eclectic” planting, in which elements have no apparent relationship to surrounding plants or to any overall theme.
9. Vertical Balance. I try to maintain interest through a vertical dimension as well as along a horizontal plane. This is much like looking at the up-down composition of a painting. It translates into providing contour to the land and low-growing plants, medium-size shrubs, small trees, and perhaps a few tall trees as well as achieving smooth, natural transitions between these vertical levels.
10. Curving Lines. Curving edges and pathways are generally more natural appearing and pleasing to the eye than straight-line angle changes. Yet straight lines can occasionally produce dramatic and effective counterpoint to the curving pattern.
11. Color. I enjoy having a wide variety of colors in view. This can be a challenge when you limit yourself to California native plants. I am always on the lookout for long-blooming natives that will give me red or white color in the Spring and early Summer when blue and yellow shades seem easier to find. As much as possible I want to add flowers of a shape that will attract butterflies.
12. Seasons. I consider seasonal variations as I plant, including fall leaf color, the interaction of evergreen and deciduous plants for winter, and the sequence of bloom.
13. Naturalness of Rock. I try to use one kind of rock as much as possible in an area, spaced and imbedded to give the impression of natural occurring rock formations. This is an element that helps to bind together different plantings into a natural look.
14. Animal Friendly. I add elements that provide cover, water, food and nesting opportunities for various forms of wildlife. Water features, bird feeders, brush or wood piles, nesting boxes, and rock clusters enhance the habitat.

Someone referred to my gardening style. I didn’t know I had one, but I guess we all do. My landscaping is not immaculate, but I don’t think it is overgrown or messy either. Perhaps it is ‘calculated casualness.’ You tell me. Thanks for being interested. Al