

Style in Native Plant Gardening

Al Kyte - 2016

Pete Veilleux (of East Bay Wilds nursery) once visited our garden and later alluded to my “style” of native plant gardening. My first thought was, “I have a style?” When I asked him how he saw my style, Pete answered, “as a collector.” I don’t think of myself in that way. In fact I try to reduce the number of species each year. But I keep finding new species I am curious about, and do have over 200 native plant species in our garden. So I guess Pete has a point.

Yet that seems to present an incomplete picture of a gardening style. If that is so, what would I include as style? I tend to look at “style” in relation to “substance”. I see “substance” as *what we do* and “style” as *how we do it*. If “what we do” is have a garden of California Native Plants, then the “how to” or style decisions would seem to fall within three broad categories: how we select plants, how we organize them in our garden, and how we maintain them.

The first of these, **how I select plants**, is influenced by several factors. Moraga summers are warm and water needs to be conserved, so I have sought plants that are drought tolerant. This eliminates from consideration most moisture-loving species. When I started in the 1970s, we were happy to find drought-tolerant plants native to any part of California. With more species now available and an awareness of the need to restore habitat for local pollinators, I have been selecting more plants native to our immediate area. Yet I still have attractive plants from other parts of the state to better communicate how beautiful a California Native garden can be. In addition to this, my own preferences for features such as leaf texture and flower shape further influence which plants I select or omit.

How I organize plants in the garden includes a concept not found in most gardening—grouping plants into habitat types. Thus the open, mixed woodland in our backyard drains along the side of our house through a riparian habitat into a warmer front yard where a chaparral area not only helps conserve water but also provides evergreen, year-around beauty. This organization, undoubtedly influenced by my time spent in botanic gardens, includes a network of trails to add a “stroll-through”, park-like feel.

To me, the third broad element of style, **how I maintain plants**, is primarily about how neat I want our garden to be. At one extreme are people who prefer a formal, immaculate look, while at the other end are those more comfortable with something so natural as to appear uncared for. I don’t see our garden at the neat-and-tidy end because people describe it as “natural”, which substantiates my attempts to make it look like a woodland or chaparral rather than a formal garden. Neither do I see our garden at the ‘uncared for’ extreme because I maintain control over the spacing and shape of plants as well as what goes on between them. In both my planting and pruning I have followed the Japanese concept of maintaining a spacial balance between plants, rocks, and water rather than “mass” my plantings as some gardeners prefer to do. Of particular interest to me is using that space between plants to create landscape elements, such as arroyos, stream beds, depressions, elevated areas, canyons, and rock outcroppings. I call this middle ground of neatness, “calculated natural.”

But a garden’s style includes these other dimensions as well, such as ours being drought-tolerant, state-wide, habitat-grouped, stroll-through, space-sensitive, wildlife-friendly, and mature. So I don’t see that any one concise label adequately describes a gardener’s style. Yet each of us does have a style that adds uniquely to the beauty and appeal of native plant gardening.