

Background and Purpose

For 14 years I have been working with the City of Orinda to develop guidelines for creek-friendly landscaping within the streambanks of the city's many creeks. We recommended using locally-native plantings, but I realized few such materials were available. So I began collecting seed for Native Here Nursery to augment their existing collection efforts from the San Pablo Creek watershed.

Then I decided to try building a garden entirely of locally-native plants (that is, species from the San Pablo Creek watershed) that would also be pleasing to a conventional garden aesthetic. That is the vision of this garden.

History of the Garden

In 1994 when we moved to this site, the front garden was an immaculately maintained lawn, large spruce and magnolia trees, and juniper ground cover. Nice, but not a single native species. I'm a botanist by training, so for me the best garden is a low-maintenance one, where plants take care of themselves and can just observe them.

The spruce tree died, presumably from negligence (read: lack of water). Joe Willingham, a Berkeley native plant gardener, helped us replace the junipers with Douglas iris and strawberries. California Gardens of Oakland placed the rocks along the parking strip, and helped us plant coffeeberry, wild ginger, yarrow and a valley oak. In 2006 Ron Lutsko Associates created a design for our front garden using mostly locally-native species. In 2010 David Bigham gave us the current design.

Demolition and Initial Installation

During the winter of 2006-2007, Greg Wolford of Californica Landscaping (aka "the strong guys") helped me remove stumps and move mountains of soil, as well as install irrigation. They brought a sensitivity to the project that was really helpful.

In early 2008, Robert Cruikshank Landscaping extended the brick patio, built a new brick path to the parking strip, and installed the arbor. Then I planted the central part of the meadow.

Plant Materials

Obtaining plant materials. Finding all the plants in the design wasn't easy, especially in the quantity required. My primary source for locally-native plant materials was Native Here Nursery, the East Bay California Native Plant Society nursery in Tilden Park. The Watershed Nursery and the Wagner Ranch Nature Area nursery also provided some locally-native materials from the San Pablo Creek watershed.

When plants with local origin were not available, I used materials from other nearby watersheds if I could. I investigated all available sources—Yerba Buena Nursery, Bay Natives, Berkeley Hort. I continue to look for locally-native plant material and make substitutions as they become available. Mostly now I save seed from the garden and grow replacement plants.

Locally-native origin is most important for species that occur very nearby in natural habitats. This is so that pollen from garden plants doesn't mix with the wild plants, potentially reducing the fitness of the wild populations. Such species include toyon, coast live oak, California sage, and the needlegrasses, and also California buckeye, cow parsnip, California rose, yerba buena, chaparral honeysuckle, Pacific sanicle, California buttercup, California rose. Twenty species are entirely locally-native in my garden.

Some local natives were already in the garden, and we incorporated them: coast live oak and toyon, all volunteers; and a valley oak planted a few years ago. The remaining native (but not locally-native) species were moved, divided and/or propagated:

- sword fern
- chain fern
- deer grass
- strawberry
- Douglas iris
- coffeeberry
- angelica
- California fuschia

Due to limited supply, I propagated or divided locally-native yerba buena, and Harford sedge. This was a cost-saver, but was a necessity because the quantities I needed were not available in the nurseries. With California fescue, for example, I purchased a huge, pot-bound individual and divided it. Fast forward through the winter, and *voila*, 20 gallon can plants.

Substitutions and modifications. The design called for shade-loving plants at the eastern end of the garden. Until the oaks and the buckeye get larger, it is just too sunny there. So I planted a patch of coyote mint in the harshest site, and extended the meadow plantings all the way to the retaining wall.

The sedges and the fescue soon grew surprisingly large in the meadow; in the garden they became much larger than in nature. I want a smaller-scale meadow nearer the path and patio, so I am substituting more needlegrass, sanicle, buttercup, blue-eyed grass, California fuchsia. A volunteer joined the party, slender hairgrass, a beautiful little local native.

Maintenance

I've made all the beginner's errors—too much water the first year killed some lupines. Shade-loving plants died in the sun. The grasses and sedges need proper haircuts in the winter.

We've held to using no fertilizer since this garden was installed, and no herbicides. Ever. Keeping after the weeds really does reduce them.

Even though these species are from this watershed, they grow in different habitats, and we can't expect them all to thrive at this site without a little help. I do water plants during the first year while they become established. I also hand-water plants that need it.

During drought, we have watered the front garden very little, implemented some domestic water-collecting, and let the back lawn go dry. Our water consumption is way down, although the gain from the front is somewhat offset by the vegetable garden in back.

My Advice to You

If you like the idea of a locally-native garden, hooray! Your walks in parks will be enriched as you look at plants with an eye toward beauty, site conditions, and plant relationships.

Make note of the species you like, and think about how the site conditions in your garden might work for them.

Work with an experienced native plant professional, at least for a design, to help you think about structure and plant combinations. You can find a list of native plant landscape designers here:

<http://www.bringingbackthenatives.net/find-a-designer>

Be flexible, and adjust as your garden develops.

It's OK to develop your garden in stages. Start with the large, slow-growing plants that will affect site conditions. Oh, and don't forget--hardscape first; it's very disruptive to construct hardscape after all your plants are installed.

A classical garden aesthetic often uses masses of plants. You probably can't afford to buy them all, so think about buying a few and dividing or amplifying from seed. That way you will learn the ones that do well in your garden, with your site conditions and style of maintenance.

And please--be ethical about the collection of wild plants. Collecting some roadside needlegrass seed in your suburban neighborhood is fine, but collecting from parks is not. Digging up plants from wildlands is not OK. Reputable native plant nurseries abide by

careful protocols for collection, so buying their stock supports sustainable use. Share with friends, and let them share with you.