

Welcome to our garden!

I am so grateful for your visit! Gardening with native plants is my passion and I want to share its joy.

This yard was converted from ivy in front and lawn in back from 2007–2008. Initial installation was finished by Christmastime 2008, but much has changed since then. I mostly see myself as the garden's caretaker but not its boss, and I can't tell it what to do. My guiding principle was always "**bring the hike home**" and now that the plants are here, my joy is in simply seeing what they do.

Below are some things I've learned and observed in this garden. I look forward to sharing this space with other gardeners and I know you have a lot you can teach me!

If you would like to continue the discussion, feel free to take my card and contact me later. Thank you for coming, and **enjoy your hike!**



Plant labels

On the labels I've indicated how close to this site the plant occurs naturally. While I consider the yard a celebration of California and therefore included plants from other parts of the state, I've tried to incorporate real locals as well. If a label says **Local**, it means the plant is from the Pinole watershed—most of these are from seeds collected within two miles. If it says **Bay Area**, then the plant grows in the Bay Area but I haven't seen it in our watershed. If it says **Other CA**, then it is from somewhere in the state outside the Bay Area.

Vital stats

Average summer highs: 80s or low 90s. Annual *highest* temperatures: low 100s
Average winter lows: high 30s. Annual *lowest* temperatures: mid 20s
(highest observed since living here: 108°, lowest: 22°)

Normal rainfall: impossible to find hard data, but somewhere between 19 and 25"

Soil: clay loam, good draining, short distance to impermeable layer. pH ~6.9
You can learn about the soil in your home's area by visiting the USDA's soil survey site:
<http://websoilsurvey.sc.egov.usda.gov>

Water table: Hard to get get info, but my guess is it is fairly high because our street is between two ridges, and at the top of the street is a seasonal creek that is now directed underneath the street.

Insects and Diseases

I am not a good gardener and would never be able to grow anything exotic that needs protection for pests. I also couldn't bring myself to think of gardening as a battle—I don't have the energy and life has enough battles. I don't see a lot of damage from insect pests or diseases; I haven't actually lost any plants to either. I occasionally see some spots or holes in leaves but nothing major. If a plant dies because of a natural condition in the yard, then I conclude it was an unsuitable plant for the site and replace it with something else.

The earth does not belong to us, we belong to the earth.
~Chief Seattle



Love is the answer.

Cat Fence

When you enter the back yard you may wonder why there appears to be a San Quentin theme: the mesh on the top of the fence. It is a DIY cat containment fence. You can purchase cat fences, but they are expensive and not much less ugly. While it will not contain a seasoned outdoor cat, it does keep my two formerly indoor cats in the yard. I don't want them to roam, mostly for their own safety, and they go nuts if kept inside, so this is how I've compromised. It's not perfect but I love my cats and do my best.

Reptiles

See wildlife list for list of species. These animals are really cool to share the yard with, though there is some danger associated with the rattlesnakes. Snakes come down off the ridge and Pinole is somewhat known for rattlers—in 1970 our neighborhood was featured in *Time* magazine in an article called "The rattlesnakes of Pinole"! If you live in the North County and find a rattler in your yard, you can call **Jerry Boyer at 510-691-7493**, who is a friend of rattlesnakes and will remove them and release them humanely, away from residential areas.



If you live in a snakey area, you may consider this when choosing plants. We used to always have rattlers in our ivy, and thick groundcovers of ceanothus or manzanita may provide a similar environment. When I redid the backyard, I originally envisioned a tall-grass "lawn" of *Festuca rubra*, with tall wildflowers, but when I started letting the cats out, it made me worry about having a literal snake-in-the grass situation, so I pulled out a lot of grass and replaced it with perennials, leaving some visible ground. A lot of birds, like towhees and sparrows, like to have that bare ground anyway.

Oh deer

We have a lot of deer here. We have come outside at night to find them sleeping in the yard. I once drove home and saw three posing in the corner as garden statues (nice tactic). They nibble some things but I've used a lot of deer-resistant plants: in general, anything with a strong leaf fragrance such as *Salvia*, *Monardella*, *Lepechinia*, *Trichostema*. I believe these make the overall space less appetizing to deer and minimize damage. They do eat heucheras, sometimes right down to the stems, but the leaves grow back quickly; you can see deer damage on the bark of the *Rhus ovata* near the driveway and the ceanothus by the sidewalk, but life has gone on for these plants. I don't chase away deer or worry about them. There was one poor guy this last year with a broken leg; he would drink the birdbath dry and munch on heuchs. I'm glad if the yard helped him out a little.



Birds

The greatest joy I have in my yard is looking out and seeing birds. (See the wildlife list for a complete list.) We have a number in summer, but it's winter that this yard is serious birdville. I do feed them seeds, especially in winter, and they benefit from the plants too. There is huge variance in species' tolerance of human presence. Some will scramble when I come outside and not return till I've been back inside for a long time. Others will land on the feeder while it is still in my hand. Hummingbirds will buzz within a few feet of me, and one recently flew under my arm while I was filling a birdbath. This is what having a yard is all about and I am grateful beyond words.

There are some wildflowers, especially *Nemophila*, whose young leaves seem to be basically sparrow chow. I know the sparrows eat those seedlings, because I've caught them in the act! But enough of the seedlings survive, and I can't stay mad at the birds. I love them.



The real miracle is not to walk on water or in air, but to walk on earth.

~Thich Nhat Hanh

Bulbs and Beasties

In my initial planting in 2008, I included 150 *Allium unifolium* bulbs on the corner and side yard. It is a wild onion with charming pink flowers, and the bulbs multiply fast. I was warned that it is basically candy for gophers. We didn't really have gophers in the yard, but I joked—sort of—that with all those alliums gophers from around the county might pack up their knapsacks and move in. Except possibly for the knapsacks, this may have happened. For a couple years the yard was under siege from gophers. They ate almost all the allium and, I believe, all the *Triteleia laxa* (Ithuriel's spear) bulbs—as well as quite a few perennials. The gophers have stayed away for the past couple years. This may be because they exhausted the allium supply, or because in low-rain years the ground is harder. Or maybe it's another reason I don't know of. The only remaining stand of allium is in an area where the previous homeowner had put a lot of gravel—presumably it is hard for gophers to gnaw through. If you plant bulbs, especially allium, it may be worth trying to protect them with gravel or cages, unless you're quite confident you don't have gophers. I've read that mint plants are naturally distasteful to gophers, so I'm now focusing on planting more *Monardella villosa*, which is in the mint family and has a strong minty smell.



The drip

You may see drip lines around the yard. I have drip on the front corner, and low-flow sprayers in the front shady area. I barely use them. Sometimes if the plants look really desperate I'll turn one or the other on for a short while, and if it's a dry spring or fall I may choose to artificially extend the moist season a little. Mostly I don't water the ground at all—it encourages weeds. In the back, my very nice nephew helped me convert the existing sprinkler system to a drip system for the veggie beds and for the patio pots, since the pots *do* require summer water. But sadly there is an underground leak when I run the system so I'm not using it. I hope to fix it some time, because watering all the pots—usually weekly—is substantial work, and I find the veggies' water demands to be utterly exhausting—every couple days at least. Growing one's own salad is fun in principle, but growing native plants is a cakewalk in comparison.



Annuals and weeds

A lot of spring color in the yard comes from annual wildflowers, which I started by tossing seeds on the ground (no need to start in pots). Most reseed; occasionally I need to supplement with more seeds, as I will next year with more *Nemophila*, *Layia*, and *Clarkia amoena*. The tricky part about this is that the yard must be weeded in winter and spring and the annual seedlings have to be worked around. Weeding would be easy and quick if all you had to do was take a hoe and scrape the ground. But when you're preserving the annuals, it becomes a somewhat surgical process, picking the weeds but leaving the desired seedlings. Some perennials volunteer by seed also, and finding those is very exciting. I love that the garden can sow itself, so I find the time commitment worth it. Anyway, spending time in the yard is like a good cup of tea: simultaneously soothing and refreshing.

Everybody got to elevate from the norm.
~Rush