

Native Garden Installation in 4 Easy Steps

Observations by Cheryl Chi, a do-it-yourselfer (mostly)

How much of a do-it-yourselfer are you? Know what you are capable of. Can you do the design? Do you want to? Are you just good for hard labor? Do you want to shop for plants? We decided that we needed help with the design. We thought we were going to buy our own plants, but time ended up being short and we paid our designer, Rick Alatorre, to help us with that, too. We basically provided the labor to install our garden and bought the flagstone.

Step 1: Decide what you can or want to do.

I am a failed Designer. I took gardening classes from the following places with the intent to design my own garden:

- [City College Continuing Education](#) in San Francisco
- [Piedmont Adult School](#)
- [The Watershed Project](#) and StopWaste.org

That was money not well-spent. I've taken other gardening classes, too, but I can't remember what they were. They were mostly one day classes or a few hours. The first two didn't have a native garden focus so I wouldn't recommend them. But these classes could potentially be good resources for you. I thought about taking a class with the [Building Education Center](#) in Berkeley and [Merritt Community College](#). I've heard great things about both, but never got around to going. After taking my other four or five classes, I realized that I was never going to design my garden no matter how many classes I took.

TIP: Visit gardens that are similar to yours (small, big, flat, hilly, sunny, shady). It will give you the best ideas for your house.

Step 2: Design (We got help)

We decided we needed help with this so I planned our 2005 the Bringing Back the Natives garden tour visits so that I would meet various designers. I saw online the gardens I liked and found out where the designers would be and made sure that we went to those gardens so I could speak to the designers. That's how we met [Rick Alatorre](#). Some designers want to design and install. Some work on big projects, others do both big and small projects. Some can do a whole design including major hardscape, others focus primarily on plantings.

TIP: Having trouble even getting started? Identify some plants you like as a basis for design. You or your designer can use that as a starting point.

Step 3: Identify resources. Buy your plants, rocks, etc. (Did some ourselves and got help)

TIP: For most plants, you probably don't want to buy anything bigger than a gallon. Larger plants are more expensive and will have more difficulty getting established. For most plants, 4 inch pots can be fine.

I think Step 2 and 3 are related and can happen at the same time, but they are separate tried to identify the major components of the process.

My resources are identified at the end of this write-up. Bringing Back the Natives does a wonderful job of providing resources.

Step 4: Preparation and Installation

TIP: Best time to plant is November through January because it's the rainy season. Growth will be focused on the roots. In California, winter is like spring for plants.

1. I learned that some people kill their lawn by placing a couple of layers of cardboard (wetting it down is good) and then putting 6-12 inches of mulch on top of that. Let it sit for a few months then clear a space, poke a hole in the cardboard, and install your plants.

I had rocks so I needed to bring in new soil. I also wanted new soil on top to reduce the amount of weeds. I cleared the planting area to about 4 inches below grade, put cardboard and put the soil on top.

2. Compact the soil.
3. We then laid out the paths and some small berms.
4. Install your plants (and irrigation).
5. Mulch. (Make sure to keep it a few inches thick to suppress weeds and lock in moisture.)
6. Hunt for slugs and water.
7. Enjoy.

Costs to Install

Installation in Oct 2006

10 cubic yards soil	\$400
Rick Alatorre, Design and Labor	\$750
76 Plants (purchased by Rick)	\$710
Flagstone (Three Rivers Rock) and	\$600

decorative rocks	
Home Depot (Misc e.g. irrigation, mulch)	\$200
Total Cost	\$2660

Other hidden costs:

Estimated Loss of Plants ¹	\$150-\$200
Disposal of old landscaping ²	????
Labor, Clearing ³	32 hours
Labor, Site Preparation	32 hours
Labor, Installation	40 hours

1. Expect some plant losses. Our plant losses were due to unusually cold and windy winter. Slugs also helped out. We probably didn't need as many plants to start either.
2. Plan for disposal of your old yard. You can arrange for a disposal bin, but since our area was small, it didn't seem cost-effective. The downside is that we still have broken concrete and rocks in our backyard.
3. Description of labor:
 - Clearing includes removal of old plants and hardscape
 - Site preparation involves removing soil to 4 inches below grade, laying down cardboard, and spreading and compacting new topsoil.
 - Installation includes putting in walkway

Labor for maintenance is not included (e.g., regular watering, weeding, trimming)

This Year's Costs

20 Plants Annie Annuals (mostly 4" pots)	\$100
9 Plants from Other Nurseries (6" & 1 gal)	\$100
Home Depot (mulch, soil)	\$100
Labor	40 hours

Lessons Learned:

1. Prep early. It's never too early to prepare for planting.
2. Identify resources for soil, rocks, plants early. Visit beforehand. Plant choices are affected by their availability
3. Costco is a great source of cardboard, so is a furniture store.
4. Write down some plants you like as a basis for design. Books, websites, nurseries can help you identify other plants.
5. Maybe you should irrigate. But it seems that it's only necessary to water the first year so it may not be worthwhile, but it will be time-intensive to hand water the first year.
6. Hunt for snails. Expect plant loss due to a variety of factors. You can add more plants the following year.
7. Put sand under your walkway to avoid shifting after a rain. This step is not necessary if you use very large pieces of flagstone, but the tradeoff is that larger pieces are harder to install yourself.
8. Give plants lots of room to grow. Concentrate on the structural plants—trees and shrubs. You can add more pretty flowers the next year.

9. Start with a small space and then add slowly.
10. It's okay if you make a mistake. You can always move a plant and buy another one.

Continuing Questions:

- We still need to learn how to care for our plants—how much to prune, water, etc. But that's all part of the process. I recently learned about this website which I am told can be helpful (<http://www.calflora.org/>), but haven't looked at it yet.

Other observations:

- It's amazing how many microclimates we have in such a small space.
 - Notice how the same plant varies in size depending on their placement in the yard.
- Once plants are established they may not need any water. I hear that some people water once or twice a month and others not at all. Your water use

TIP: My new favorite way to learn about native plants: www.laspilitas.com. They also have a cool [garden design program](http://mynativeplants.com) (mynativeplants.com) that will create a design for you based on factors you enter. You can also mail order your plants from them.

Our Resources

<p>Flagstone Morgan Bros Patios 14305 Washington Ave San Leandro, CA 94578 (510) 357-5220</p>	<p>Soil American Soil and Stone 2121 San Joaquin Street Richmond, CA 94804 (510) 292-3000</p>
<p>City of San Leandro Residents only Free Sidewalk Removal (510) 577-3305 Free Tree Planting (510) 577-3448 http://www.ci.san-leandro.ca.us/PWTree.asp</p>	<p>Plants* (first three in mailer) Annie Annuals UC Botanical Garden Native Here Nursery Mail order: www.laspilitas.com</p>
<p>Other Resources Designer: Rick Alatorre</p> <p>Learn about native plants: www.laspilitas.com Potential financial assistance: EBMUD Landscape Rebate Program How to hire a landscape designer and other resources: http://www.stopwaste.org/home/index.asp?page=8</p>	

*Rick also bought plants from some of the other resources listed on the bringingbackthenatives.net website.