

Going Native

By Anne Robin

I've written about one of my gardening heroes in this column before: my big brother Jerry. He started gardening in our urban Los Angeles backyard when I was about 8 or 9 years old. I watched the small zucchini seed he planted turn into 10 pound "zucchini boats" and enjoyed the 8 foot tall sunflowers in our front yard.

Many years later (don't ask!) and many miles apart, we still share a love of plants and gardening. Jerry started re-working his yard in Pasadena a couple of years ago. He had originally planned on a large vegetable garden, some fruit trees, a large patch of lawn, and some roses (mostly for his lady friend of the time). While setting up a newsletter for Pasadena Water & Power (Jerry is a graphic designer by trade), he started reading about water shortages and "water smart" gardening with California native plants. Soon after that, he read about some classes at the Theodore Payne Foundation and decided to attend. From a mild interest grew an obsession.....

Out came most of the patch of lawn (he left a little bit for his three rescued beagles to play on). Out came all the very thirsty exotic plants. Out came the struggling front grassy area overshadowed by a huge California live oak (*Quercus* spp). And.....he went native! The front area was planted in sedums (stonecrop) and blue fescue grasses for ground cover. In went salvias (sages), penstemons, Douglas irises, ribes (currants), artemisias, heuchera (coral bells), ceanothus (native lilacs), eriogonums (buckwheats), mimulus (monkeyflowers), and a lovely *Chilopsis* (desert willow) tree. The drip system he had installed for the exotics was reprogrammed to virtually nothing.

And all of the wildlife (ok, the wildlife you can find in downtown Pasadena) came calling. He has installed several water features, some with solar pumps. He has many bird feeders with different kinds of seed and in differing types. And, he never uses a lick of chemical fertilizers or pest control. His garden, and his mood, thrives! The small ecosystem he has created behind his tiny house is vibrant with life, colors, textures, scents, and flavors.

Best of all, whenever I make it down to SoCal to visit, my brother and I now have a tradition of Saturday morning shopping...at the Theodore Payne Native Plant nursery! We can spend hours looking through the new plants they have for sale, discussing the various varieties, planning the best place they may fit in his yard, and comparing the difference between native plants that will thrive in Pasadena and those that will make it here in my Zone 7 (or actually 1A at the Twain Harte elevation) yard. I always find something to buy that will "do" up here. We are plant nerds together! The rest of the family doesn't quite get it, but at least they know it is a relatively healthy and safe (except on the pocketbook) habit.

I get to snicker at the prices of some of the plants for sale, knowing I have a yard full of nice manzanitas here—for free! And when I saw miner's lettuce for sale I almost lost it. I try to be polite, knowing that I am blessed to live in the rich botanic environment that we have here in the foothills.

So, moral of the story. My delightful and very brilliant brother has gone native. The benefits to the environment have been innumerable. His water bill has gone down considerably. The birds, butterflies, squirrels, and his beagles are healthy and lively. And he is a very happy gardener!

If you are interested in planting more native plants in your yard, there are a number of great resources. The California Native Plant Society website (www.CNPS.org) has links to our local native plant society, articles, plant resources, and some great ideas for creating native gardens. The Theodore Payne Foundation (www.theodorepayne.org) is located in Sun Valley. Their website also has lots of great information and links. There are a number of terrific books on native plants in our local library. Or, call the Master Gardener office at 209.533.5696 for a home visit from one of our volunteers who specializes in native plants. We will be glad to show you the way to tread lightly on the earth...by going Native!

Anne Robin became a Master Gardener in 2006 and applies what she's learned to her higher elevation garden.