

Resolving To “Live Greener”

by Marlys Bell,

Tuolumne County Master Gardener

Each year at this time, we review our gardening and landscaping progress—our successes and disappointments—in order to set priorities for the coming year. This year, we are thinking about it in the context of our goal of “living more green.” (Yes, I know it should be living “more greenly,” or “living greener”....just go with me, ok?)

This commitment is affecting our gardening practices as well as how we use and manage our outside space. Instead of focusing on the beauty of flowers, how many plants have died, or the number of irrigation systems still needed, we are asking ourselves the following questions. Can we allocate more space to produce edibles? Do we have adequate food, water and habitat to attract bees, butterflies and bats? Are we using all of our resources, recycling and retaining as much as possible (water, runoff, leaves, llama manure, etc) on the property? What else can we do to reduce fossil fuel use, emissions, pesticides, and our “carbon footprint?”

Instead of saying we are “living greenly,” I prefer to say we are living “more green,” recognizing that it is a process of making choices that moves us in that direction. In addition to the carbon footprint concept, we are trying to be better stewards of the air and water and land, and their inhabitants—particularly those affected by our actions, such as birds, beneficial bugs and frogs. It is also important that what we put in place be fairly sustainable or self-supporting and that our efforts be focused on initial implementation and then the harvesting of our efforts.

We have already implemented some of the items with a big impact on our environment, such as installing solar panels; eliminating chemically based pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers; mulching; and grouping plants with similar water needs together. Although moving to the next level takes some reflection and determination, I am excited by the prospect of growing more of our own food. Our questions are: what, where and how? In an area previously allocated for perennial edibles, we are removing some of the herbs to make room for more asparagus, rhubarb and strawberries. We also want to try once again to grow raspberries, blackberries and blueberries. Last year’s efforts failed. They all died. By consulting with other Master Gardeners who are growing them in similar conditions, we hope to figure out what to do differently next time. Until we can successfully grow our own, we are committed to buying berries locally, in season, at the Farmers Market and then freezing them so we can enjoy organically grown berries year round.

To encourage us to eat more vegetables, we created raised beds in a new area dedicated to organic gardening methods designed to produce maximum yield in minimum space. Our first cool weather vegetable garden is producing many kinds of lettuce, spinach, Swiss chard, cabbage, beets, broccoli and carrots. Part of the new garden was left fallow to provide room for early crops such as potatoes, garlic, kale, peas and more broccoli, cabbage and chard. In the meantime, to enrich the soil and prevent weeds and erosion, we should cover the soil with composted manure, or a cover crop such as alfalfa, buckwheat or annual ryegrass.

When the cool weather crops finish, we will plant warm season vegetables such as peppers, tomatoes, squash, melons and beans. But before we do, we will need to

replenish the nutrients used up by the previous crops. That reality forces us to get more serious about composting and creating our own amendments. Our llamas represent an unused resource. Not only is their manure ready to use, it is deposited in neat piles. All we have to do is harvest it. We are also planning to get some new pets: red wigglers. They are worms that will be kept in their own box to create rich compost by recycling paper, kitchen wastes and yard debris (such as leaves).

Another area where we wish to focus our “living greener” attention is on reducing gas-powered equipment and electricity use. Although our solar panels feed directly into the grid, last year’s usage exceeded production. Most electricity is used inside the house but there are areas outside where energy use could be reduced. Outside lights are already on timers or motion detectors, or have light-sensitive controllers. We should do the same for our fountains. Or better yet, just unplug them and think of them as sculptures or garden ornaments. (You can purchase or build solar-operated pumps for fountains.) We have also decided not to heat the greenhouse and to use blankets for cold sensitive plants instead. Eliminating more of the turf grass would reduce the amount of fuel needed for lawn mowers and edgers. Or if we can figure out a way to get the goats to eat only what we want, they may be put in charge of lawn mowing and fertilizing!

A continuing issue is water management. For the vegetable garden, a water collection system that stores winter rains for later use is a high priority. We have also resolved that, except for edibles, any new garden areas will be devoted to natives not needing supplemental summer water, once established. But there is still the problem of getting new plants established, which can take two or three years. This year I lost too many new plants, because I depended on the fall rains which did not come or on our being able to water them. We were also not helped by raccoons that uprooted plants looking for tasty treats. From now on, before developing any new areas, I need to make sure that systems are in place to make an area sustainable, with minimal intervention from us.

So, although progress has been made in our commitment to “live more green,” more can be done. The results are worth it. Not only do we contribute to the health of the planet but also we become more self-sufficient and ultimately lower our living costs and expenses. These are all powerful motivators to set goals and push ourselves to do more each year.

Marlys and her husband Jay are working hard to make their property a demonstration of practical things that can be done by homeowners to “live more green.”