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## Will Native Plants Take Over Front Lawns?

By *Sophie Braccini*



Shary Rosenbaum's garden in Moraga Photo Sophie Braccini

Replacing all or part of the front lawn with native plants was one of the highlights of the May 2nd 'Bring Back the Natives' garden tour. The different-looking style, once scarcely seen, is spreading like weeds in Lamorinda neighborhoods. But even a native plant advocate like Nora Harlow, of the East Bay Municipal Utility District (EBMUD,) says, "It's not an easy endeavor to replace a lawn with native plants... but done right, it's absolutely gorgeous." Speaking from experience, local homeowners explain why they've made that choice, in spite of the tradition of green grass that has dominated the suburban landscape for decades.

The green lawn is a well-established American tradition. "A smooth, closely shaven surface of green is by far the most essential element of beauty on the grounds of a suburban house," wrote Frank J. Scott, in *The Art of Beautifying Suburban Home Grounds*, in 1870. Today, as author Michael Pollan ("The Omnivore's Dilemma") noted, "Like the interstate highway system, like fast food chains, like telephone, television and cable, the lawn has served to unify the American landscape." North America now has more than 32 million acres of lawn under cultivation, occupying more land than any single crop, including wheat, corn, or tobacco.

The tradition does not have its roots on this continent. According to American-Lawn.com, the green, weed-free lawns so common today didn't exist in America until the late 18th century. ... Instead, the area just outside the front door of a rural home was typically packed dirt or perhaps a cottage garden that contained a mix of flowers, herbs, and vegetables. In England, however, many of the wealthy had sweeping green lawns across their estates. Americans with enough money to travel overseas returned to the U.S. with images of the English lawn firmly planted in their minds. This image of wealth and prosperity swept the country with the selection of the proper crop of grass for golf courses and the spread of two key elements, the garden hose and the lawn mower. Today, the Canadian Center for Architecture goes as far as saying that "the preservation of a two-inch-high verdant pile is at once the common ground between happy neighbors, conforming to an unwritten and unspoken social contract."

The desire for non-conformity was one of the motivations of Moraga's Al Kyte when he decided in the early 70's to remove his front lawn. More importantly, maintaining grass just didn't make much sense to him. "My garden has a clay soil with slope and a lot of sun," he said, "I could just see the water run down the hill." When the Moraga resident took a class on how to attract birds to his garden by planting native plants he had a revelation, and replaced his grass with a Manzanita chaparral and wild flowers. "I haven't had to water it since the 70's," he says, "and it's beautiful."

Shary Rosenbaum and her husband worked with a landscape architect. "We didn't have the necessary knowledge of plants to create the garden ourselves," she said. Originally the Rosenbaum's had grass and shrubs, but everything died in the last drought and needed to be taken out. "We wanted a garden that would be low water and low maintenance," said Rosenbaum, "being different was not a problem."

Local real estate agent Ben Olsen does not see a risk to the value of a home if one chooses a path of non-conformity. "Any well designed native garden will look better than a lawn," he says, "if there is a backyard lawn for kids to play, a native

front garden is a real asset."

Thinking in term of return on investment might be a good idea because native gardens can be costly to install. "It's horribly expensive," said Rosenbaum, who didn't want to be more specific, but added, "It's more than my salary as a lecturer at two universities." Rosenbaum adds that she has no regrets and loves her garden, but if there was one thing she would do differently it would be to negotiate better with the landscape company.

If cost can be a barrier to entry in the native garden, lack of knowledge is just as detrimental to its spread. Garth Jacober at Mt. Diablo Nursery does not sell many natives. "People don't gravitate toward these plants," he says, "when they think natives, they think ugly."

Kenny Murakami at the Moraga Garden Center agrees, "When they are small, the native plants don't look very attractive, it takes knowledge and education to buy them, it's not an impulse buy." However, Murakami reports having seen an increase in sales of native plants. "Over the years the sales are getting better and better," he says, "it started even before the drought and it increased dramatically last fall, which is the best time to plant." Murakami has been getting more variety recently, but he can't stock large quantities of plants since natives don't like to live in a pot and require a high turn over. His more popular plants are the many varieties of Manzanitas and California wild lilacs.

Barbara Leitner is a botanist, so for her the learning curve was not too steep when she decided to replace the lawn of her Orinda property with a meadow of wild flowers. Leitner went a step further than most; she wanted local native plants in her garden. She started much of the vegetation from seeds she collected. "I wanted plants whose ancestors grew here in the wild," she said. "They are genetically compatible with wild life and will have no impact on natural populations outside the garden." Leitner still worked with a landscape architect to design her garden, "combining plants in a garden is an art," she says, "and I'm just a scientist."

With her local native garden in front, Leitner saved 40% on her water bill last summer, but she does not ostracize lawns. "Having some green lawn is nice to play games and we have some in the back," she says, "it's all about balance."

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