



Even in late September, my garden offers abundant resources in the form of nectar, pollen, and seeds from late blooming species such as elegant madia (*Madia elegans*), foreground, and goldenrod (*Solidago californica*), background. The meadow can be seen behind the short wooden fence. Photograph by Charlotte Torgovitsky.

MY HOME GROUND: INSPIRATION FOR A HABITAT GARDEN

by Charlotte Torgovitsky

All my garden pathways lead to and from the wild parts of our property; and it's the untamed open space surrounding our home that makes this place so special. My husband and I live in the more rural northern part of Marin County on a spur of Mount Burdell, the "other" mountain in Marin (in addition to the better known Mount Tamalpais).

The woodlands surrounding our

home are an interesting, hybridizing mix of coast live oak, blue oak, Oregon oak, and black oak (*Quercus agrifolia*, *Q. douglasii*, *Q. garryana*, *Q. kelloggii*) that forms a patchy canopy on the south facing hillside of our two-acre property. Monkey-flower (*Mimulus aurantiacus*) and California sagebrush (*Artemisia californica*) are established at the edges of the tree canopies. These are plants I've also integrated into my garden.

Toyons (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*) grow in amongst the oaks; some the size of a substantial tree!

LEARNING "THE WILDS" FIRST

Our hillside overlooks the wetlands surrounding Novato Creek, giving us a beautiful vantage point for the seasonal activity of birdlife.

Our house is situated next to a meadow, another center of wildlife activity. The meadow is dominated by purple needlegrass (*Stipa pulchra*), and comes alive as soon as the rains start, with the fresh new growth of ground iris (*Iris macrosiphon*), blue-eyed grass (*Sisyrinchium bellum*), buttercups (*Ranunculus californicus*), milkmaids (*Cardamine californica*), and soap lilies (*Chlorogalum pomeridianum*). Later still come lots of native bulbs: *Calochortus*, *Brodiaeas*, and *Dichelostemmas* start to show themselves amongst the grasses again.

My appreciation for natives in the garden originates with my love for the wilds of California. I've spent years hiking the beautiful trails of Marin with friends and family, and going on naturalist-led outings. I still recall a family camping trip we took in Mendocino National Forest years ago, when I was awestruck by the beauty of a mountain mahogany (*Cercocarpus betuloides*) in late summer, its halo of silvery-tailed achenes glistening in the sun. That was the moment I decided to take on a new avocation and learn all I could about California's magnificent flora and all the attendant fauna.

WHY A HABITAT GARDEN?

The garden has been my sanctuary since immigrating to America as a child. My family is Danish, but we came to California from Bombay, India, where I was born, leaving me totally bewildered in yet another place where I did not belong. The little plot of land my dad bestowed upon me when I was ten years old, to do with as I pleased, became my safe haven; a place where life made sense in some universal sort of way. I have been growing food, flowers, and herbs ever since, creating little patches of beauty and harmony wherever I live.

Being a lifelong student of nature, and one who still derives great pleasure from being outside "play-



Creating a habitat garden is all about being a good steward of the land and recreating the interconnected elements of an ecosystem. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Butterflies find abundant resources in the meadow; an anise swallowtail feeds on nectar from blue dicks (*Dichelostemma capitatum*). • Some common weeds, such as cudweed (*Gnaphalium luteo-album*) provide valuable resources in a habitat garden. This is the beautiful late-instar caterpillar of the American lady butterfly. Photograph by Charlotte Torgovitsky. • An American lady feeds on coyote mint (*Monardella villosa* 'Russian River'). • A pair of Ash-Throated Flycatchers have used this nesting box for the last three breeding seasons. Birds often return to successful nesting sites year after year! • A male Western Bluebird brings a caterpillar to feed hungry nestlings. All other photographs above by Bob and Mieko Watkins.

ing in the garden," I wanted to create an environment around our house that was both beautiful and full of life. A habitat garden is just that, but so much more than mere



For a few weeks in late spring, I would see this Barn Owl nestling looking out on the world outside the nest box. I named him "Albert Owlstein." Photographs by Bob and Mieko Watkins.

ornament. This style of gardening, when approached in a thoughtful manner, is all about biological associations, stewardship of the land, and an effort to recreate the interconnected elements of an ecosystem. Only organic methods are employed, and pesticides are never used. I strive to create a garden with a sense of the surrounding plant community, but with increased biodiversity and enhanced foraging opportunities. My intended goal is to bring nature as close to my home as possible.

PREPARING THE GARDEN SPACE

I was happy that the previous owners of our property had not done much gardening. The only area that had been landscaped was a hot sunny

slope between the house and driveway and our small private street. The row of dreadful oleanders (*Nerium oleander*) along the curb came out first, and then a sad-looking pepper tree (*Schinus molle*); the rosemary draped over a retaining wall stayed. A dozen large Echioiums were removed, a few at a time, as my new plantings were establishing. Pride of Madeira (*Echium candicans*)



is an invasive plant, and though lots of insects and hummingbirds like its flower nectar, seeds germinate readily and can spread into open space areas.

My son and I worked together on this front border design. Once we had the planting areas and pathways laid out, tons of boulders were brought in and carefully placed to provide accents in the garden border. Low retaining walls along the pathways were built using dry-stack methods from basalt flats and chips, and pea gravel was used to cover the pathways. The stones and gravel create a heat sink that lots of insects, especially butterflies, appreciate. The small spaces between the stones in the dry-stacked walls provide sanctuary for insects and a host of other creatures such as western fence lizards, skinks, and tree frogs.

Additional soil was brought in to create mounds and swales on the slope, and we installed an in-line drip irrigation system. I planted red-

buds (*Cercis occidentalis*), silk tassel bush (*Garrya elliptica*), mountain mahogany (*Cercocarpus betuloides*), and holly-leaf cherry (*Prunus ilicifolia*) to visually tie the border in with the oak woodlands on either side. I used bunchgrasses such as deergrass (*Muhlenbergia rigens*), fescues (*Festuca* spp.), and reed grass (*Calamagrostis* spp.) to blend the garden in with the view of the meadow close by. Grasses provide lots of habitat resources including seeds, cover, and nesting materials, and they add movement to a perennial border.

REASONS FOR MY PLANT SELECTIONS

Because many herbs provide lots of nectar for insects, I added artemisias, lavenders, rosemary, and other herbs liberally, and repeated them in the border plantings. I'm particularly fond of salvias, so I planted lots of different species. All the native species are included, as well as a number from South and Central America. There's a salvia blooming at any given time of the year, which keeps Anna's Hummingbirds happy without an artificial feeder!

My front border is open to the deer, so these mint family plants are ideal. Deer do not like the aromatic foliage, and they never browse the grasses either. The hardest plants to establish in this border are native plants that deer favor, such as ceanothus. However, if young ceanothus are caged for several years until they reach a mature size, they are then able to survive some browsing by the deer.

I always plant for the insects first. Drifts of colorful flowering perennials, blooming at all times of the year, are sure to bring in all sorts of six-legged creatures. I plant wildflowers in all parts of the property, and I make sure to include ample plantings of butterfly larval host plants. In some cases the best host plants are



TOP: Clarkias blooming in May provide nectar and pollen, as well as petal segments used by leafcutter bees (*Megachile* spp.) to build cells for their larvae. Photograph by Charlotte Torgovitsky. • BOTTOM: Coyote mint (*Monardella villosa* 'Russian River'), in full bloom in July, grows next to a path that leads to the meadow. Photograph by Bob and Mieko Watkins.



A view from top of the meadow east of my garden. The wetlands can be seen below. Photograph by Bob and Mieko Watkins.

weeds. I keep “controlled patches” on parts of our property: cudweeds (*Gnaphalium luteo-album*) for the American lady, and Italian thistles (*Carduus* spp.) for the painted lady and mylitta crescent.

Once insect populations established I noticed an increase in the number of birds visiting the garden and adjacent woodlands. I’ve always seen Western Bluebirds on the hill above us and in the wetland areas below; and within a few years of planting my front border I saw adults and fledglings foraging here in summer. Tree Swallows were also foraging here in large groups. The first year a pair attempted to build a nest in the dryer vent. The following year I put up suitable nesting boxes, and now these birds breed here every spring.

Four years ago I heard Ash-throated Flycatchers in the woods; then I saw them inspecting a Screech Owl box, and all the cavities in an old oak. These are one of my favorite birds, and I first became familiar

with them while camping, so I was thrilled to also see them here at home. That fall I put up a nesting box in the old oak, and the next year in early May they were back. They’re now here each year at about the same time. They build their nest and raise a brood that fledges by the first day of summer.

GIVING BACK TO NATURE

Within a fenced area of the garden I also grow fruits and vegetables, and naturally the produce is shared, sometimes grudgingly, with the animals. I’m just starting to plant areas in the woodlands on our property, and am hoping to reestablish an understory of native shrubs and bunch grasses. Small areas are planted each rainy season but without irrigation systems, so it’s up to me to nurture the plants along through the dry seasons by providing supplemental water until they become well-established.

My native habitat garden and my

practice of “gardening for California” have become a source of many of the things that matter the most to me: nature and being close to all living things, beauty, friendships, and service to the community. My garden is also a source of mother plants from which I take cuttings, collect seed, and get divisions. By growing California natives in my new nursery I’m able to share plants and encourage gardeners all over the Bay Area to create habitat gardens.

Habitat gardening is a wonderful way that each of us can help, in a small way, to restore our environment, and start to recreate corridors between remaining open spaces. I share my observations and experiences as a habitat gardener, as well as tips on plant propagation, in my blog, which is part of our new nursery website: www.homegroundhabitatnursery.org.

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