

How I Got Started Gardening with Natives

Kevin Callahan, San Leandro

This is a short narrative describing how I got rid of my lawn. I'd be more than happy to talk about any aspect of the project in greater detail.

LEARNING ABOUT PLANTS – Summer 2002

I poured over 3 books starting in the Summer of 2002. Sunset Western Garden (native and butterfly lists), Growing California Native Plants by Marjorie Schmidt and The Habitat Garden Book by Nancy Bauer. I looked for natives that were drought resistant, most beneficial to wildlife and interesting to me. By the Fall, I had a sense of what I wanted the yard to look like and roughly what plants could go where.

EBMUD REBATE – October 2002

In September/October, I applied for a rebate through EBMUD. I had to have a well developed plan pre-approved before spending any money. Once approved, I had 90 days to complete the work. This wasn't easy, but was definitely worth it. They paid for 50% of equipment and 25% of plants/soil for a total of \$1,000. EBMUD now has new rules. In order to qualify for the program, you need to be a real water-hog, and show that the converted garden will conserve water.

http://www.ebmud.com/conserving_&_recycling/residential/

SOIL – November 2002

I had to find someone to remove the lawn and the top 4 inches of soil from the 1700 square feet on the property, around 20 (cubic) yards. I started with landscapers in the Yellow pages, who were fairly expensive. I ended up finding my guy on Craig's List, <http://www.craigslist.org>, by searching for "bobcat." He had a small bobcat which made the job a lot quicker and less expensive. Next, I had to choose a soil product. I needed to loosen up the clay/silt. Emphasizing sand would make the soil into concrete. Since the soil was already heavy, I didn't need a large percentage of topsoil. The soil stores were more than happy to give advice on amending clay/silt soil and they gave me several options. I went with a sandy loam mix with wood fines, compost and lava fines. I had 20 yards of soil (and 20 yards of redwood string mulch, gorilla hair) delivered from Clark's Garden Center in Hayward in November of 2002. Davis Street Garden Center, part of the Davis St Recycling Center in San Leandro, is also good as is American Soil Products in Richmond. I had rocks and gravel delivered from Morgan Bros. Patios in San Leandro. I now hear that you can get free mulch from the City of San Leandro via Davis St.

At this point I made a mistake. I should have demanded that the existing exposed clay be rototilled before the topsoil was spread. Because of earlier house construction, the dry weather and because the bobcat had been driving on the yard, the clay was particularly hard. Wetting it down the night before and tilling it the next day would have

greatly improved the guy's ability to mix the clay in with the new topsoil once the topsoil was spread. Instead, he rototilled after spreading the topsoil, which didn't seem to do much of anything. I only realized this once I started putting the plants in the ground. It took a huge amount of effort to break up the hardpan by hand underneath each and every plant. In addition to rototilling, I would have had him use a two-person pole digger at the places where I was to plant trees and large bushes. This would have loosened the soil up even more.

BUYING PLANTS – October/November 2002

My approach has been to buy a large variety of plants and see which ones thrive. I bought my first set of 50 plants at the CNPS Native Plant Sale at Merritt College in the beginning of October 2002. <http://www.ebcnps.org/index.html> This is a native plant feeding frenzy, so show up early, have a list of what you want and bring a friend to help you.

I bought another 100+ plants at Yerba Buena Nursery in Woodside <http://www.yerbabuenanursery.com/> This place is amazing (and not cheap). They have a huge collection of natives and were very helpful. The demonstration garden is worth a days visit alone.

IRRIGATION EQUIPMENT AND INSTALLATION – February 2003

I bought Irritrol equipment and Netafim tubing at Ewing Irrigation on Polvorosa Avenue in San Leandro. Urban Farmer in Richmond is another good place. I have 5 valves, a "wet" and "dry" in both front and back and a lawn valve in the back.

I hired a guy to install the new spigots, valves, PVC, underground lawn sprinkler system and sod. He did the installation in February of 2003.

The lawn is watered by underground tubes. So far, I'm impressed, but we'll see. The lawn is in a shady spot, so is suffering from rust.

THE PAST 3 YEARS

I think that I've lost a couple of plants due to over watering. The first was a Fremont-edendron. It was doing great and then wilted and died within a week. When it started to wilt, I thought that it needed more water, which probably sped up its demise. I now resist watering, unless the books specifically call for regular watering.

A number of plants, around 5%, haven't made it. I've moved a number of plants, giving some more sun and some less.

I have a great ladybug factory going. The milkweeds attract aphids, which attract ladybugs. The ladybugs lay their eggs on the Brandegeee Sage. By the end of May there are dozens of ladybug larvae covering the sage.

There are many types of native bees in the garden. As far as I know, native bees DON'T sting. The California Buckwheat, Sages and Ceanothus are particular good at pulling in bees and insects.

The grasses, Checkerbloom, Buckeye, Oak and Coyote Mint are particularly good at pulling in butterflies – Skippers, Ladies, Buckeyes.

Almost all of the plants came from 1-gallon containers and grew tremendously in the first 24 months.