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Native plant maven wins conservation award

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SAN PABLO -- Kathy Kramer will rub elbows with some high-profile company today because of an idea that took root just outside the door of her San Pablo home.

Kramer, who started the "Bringing Back the Natives Garden Tour" in Contra Costa and Alameda counties in 2005, is one of 12 honorees at this year's National Wildlife Federation Conservation Achievement Awards in Washington, D.C., joining distinguished recipients such as former Vice President Al Gore and California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

"It's thrilling for me, but it's also great for the native movement to have this exposure," Kramer said by cell phone this week while listening to a band play in front of the Lincoln Memorial.

Kramer will be honored with the federation's Education Achievement award for "exemplary leadership in educating and engaging both students and adults about their local environment."

For three years, she has organized the free, self-guided tour of East Bay gardens that are made up of at least 50 percent native plants. Each year, 5,000 people register for the tour of yards at 60 homes across the East Bay.

The idea for the tour came from Kramer's efforts and frustrations in trying to plant a drought-tolerant garden at her home. A native garden planted properly for its area can make a major difference in reducing pollution, saving energy and providing a habitat where wildlife can thrive, she said.

"It's interesting to me that the theme of this year's awards is climate change," Kramer said. "Most people don't realize that a large percentage of the energy that's used each year is used to move water."

A native plant garden uses about one-tenth the water of a traditional garden, she said, and doesn't contaminate the water because no pesticides or fertilizer are needed.

Kramer has a long, award-winning record in environmental education, working for 15 years with the San Francisco Estuary Institute, founding the Aquatic Outreach Institute (now the Watershed Project) and establishing workshops to train educators on creeks, marshes, wetlands and other links to the Bay Area watershed.

She was nominated for the award by Mary Burnette, an associate director at the federation's headquarters in Reston, Va., who has helped Kramer publicize the native garden tour.

"The idea of the awards is that nationally there are thousands, maybe even millions, of people who are doing things to help protect the environment," Burnette said. "Not just small things, but reaching many people."

One of Kramer's hopes is that the native garden idea will take hold nationally, bringing more patches of land in harmony with their surroundings and having an even greater benefit for the environment.

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Schwarzenegger will be given the Government Award at today's Conservation Awards ceremony (known informally as "The Connies") at the Mayflower Hotel, and Gore will be honored as the Ding Darling Conservationist of the Year. California resident Laurie David, who produced Gore's film about climate change, "An Inconvenient Truth," will be given a special achievement award.

"It hardly seems possible," Kramer said of the award. "Ever since I got the award letter I've been marveling."

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MORE INFORMATION

For details about the next Bringing Back the Natives Garden Tour, which will be held in May, visit <http://www.bringingbackthenatives.net>.

For details about the 2007 Connie Awards, visit <http://www.nwf.org/about/connieawards2007.cfm>.

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