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Changing your garden, changing your life

By Sophie Braccini



Kay Countryman and Ron Briggs Photos Sophie Braccini

Every year, the Bringing Back the Natives Garden Tour features new and mature gardens composed mostly of native plants. The three Lamorinda gardens featured here - and which will be on the tour - are each so different from each other, but all testify of how gardening practices have shaped not only the landscape but also the lives of the gardeners.

Over several decades Orinda's Robert Sorenson has restored the wild native habitat on his very large property that extends on both sides of a creek; Kay Countryman and Ron Briggs replaced the lawn in their medium size backyard three years ago with natives, working with a landscape architect; while Tré Fran has transformed a relatively small front-yard into an intricate kingdom for tens of different natives. Each of these residents came from a different background but with a similar quest for beauty and authenticity. They all say that the experience they have in their garden is enriching their lives.

Sorenson embarked on the restoration of his one-acre property years ago. The front of the Orinda house already sets the tone with native grasses under the trees, and the voyage in nature continues in the back. It is somewhat of a little expedition to explore the whole property. Sorenson has built stairs and bridges to access both sides of the creek with recycled woods and there are no guardrails of any type. But the hiking effort is totally worthwhile.

There, people will not only discover California natives, they will be exposed to an area that has been entirely restored to its original flora. Sorenson removed all the invasive and nonnative plants and went on a hunt for plants from the local watershed. Collecting seeds in nearby parks and buying small plants in specialized nurseries, he worked tirelessly to create a sustainable space of beauty. There are literally hundreds of native plants to be discovered on that land.

Sorenson is a Berkeley optometrist who says that gardening is his way of balancing his life. He feels that he is a student of nature, and that even if he has researched plants for years there is still so much for him to learn. He also loves to experiment and propagate. During the tour, several speeches and a concert will take place in the beautiful garden.

Tré Frane's garden is also the result of a lifelong quest. The plant physiologist studied the functioning of plants and was a technology teacher at Glorietta Elementary School for years. She knows her plants and loves to experiment in her garden. The relatively small front yard opened during the tour is a treasure trove for anyone interested in natives. Frane says that more than 50 different species are represented. Over the years she has cultivated over 100 different plants. She observes them, but if she notices that they do not thrive in her garden, she lets them go.

Almost every morning when the weather is right, she comes to her sitting rock in the garden with a cup of coffee, enjoys the beauty, notices the changes and observes the natural life that thrives in her garden.

During the tour where she'll be featured for the first time, she plans to be there along friends who have volunteered to help and she will answer questions. She will show off her three different varieties of poppies, wild gingers, yarrows, different buckwheats, irises, dogwoods and so many more. Alexandra Ashton, the landscape architect who worked with her to reshape her garden and who proposed new plants, will also be there.

In their Lafayette home Kay Countryman and Ron Briggs will also showcase their garden for the first time. The backyard used to be a lawn that year after year absorbed an increasing water - and financial - budget. Countryman had been going to the Bringing Back the Natives Garden Tour for years and really liked a garden a friend of hers had done. Roxy Wolosenko of Roxy Designs was the architect and she and her husband decided to work with her.

Klein designed the garden and established the plant list, creating spaces and areas in the garden that gave the couple a feeling of space they had never had before. The garden was completed two years ago and the couple soon noted that it had consequences on their lives they had not expected.

Not only was their water cut by 66 percent, but the new landscape created a new experience for them. They say that it is as if the garden suddenly became alive. They felt that it was drawing them outside; they noticed that they were spending much more time in the garden, feeling grounded and happy. There they observe the wildlife coming back, the change of seasons, the beauty and variety of the environment. Briggs said that he would never have guessed how much the new garden would mean for his well-being.

The Tour

The Bringing Back the Natives Garden Tour is on Sunday, May 7. It is free and self-guided. This year, for the first time, participants can choose between receiving a free PDF of the 80 page garden guide or paying \$10 for the printed guide. More information at www.bringingbackthenatives.net. There are 39 gardens on the tour, eight from Lamorinda, and several nurseries, including some that rarely open their

gates to the public.



Robert Sorenson



Photo Sophie Braccini



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