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When native plants share space with a mini-farm

By Sophie Braccini



Ed McAlpine and Anne Chambers in their Moraga garden. Photo Sophie Braccini

Anne Chambers and her husband, Ed McAlpine, view the utility of a garden with different eyes. For Chambers it is a place where the local flora is nurtured for the pleasure of the eyes and to reminisce the many hikes she loves to go on in the area; while for McAlpine, a garden is a place where useful production is conducted, where food is grown, where tree branches become furniture, and where food waste is turned into compost. Like any marriage, theirs is made of compromise, up to the garden, where both of their visions mix harmoniously to create an arbor of useful peace and beauty.

This year, the Chambers-McAlpine Moraga garden near Campolindo will be part of the Bringing Back the Natives Garden Tour on May 5. The tour creator Kathy Kramer always said that gardens featured on the tour had to be at least 60 percent or more natives, but that food does not count. She says she is very happy with this latest addition to the tour where so many fruit trees and edible

plants live side by side with the valley oak, coast silktassel, toyon, manzanita, ceanothus, salvias, Monkey flowers, coral bells, coffee berries, native roses and so many more. This is the first year for the Chambers-McAlpine's garden on the tour, one of the 35 gardens featured in Alameda and Contra Costa counties.

Approaching the house, a beautiful apple tree graces the front yard with its many pink blossoms. The garden boasts 26 varieties of fruit trees, including Violette de Bordeaux fig, Lamb Abbey Pearmain and Spitzenburg apples, and Clergeau and Comice pears, among others. McAlpine's philosophy about pruning the fruit trees appears immediately: the footprint is reduced and all the fruits are easily within reach. McAlpine is now retired and spends quite a great deal of time in the quarter-acre garden. It is a family tradition for him, coming straight from his mother, who already in the '50s and '60s had an organic garden where he, the older child, was often in charge of the weeding, necessary for good production.

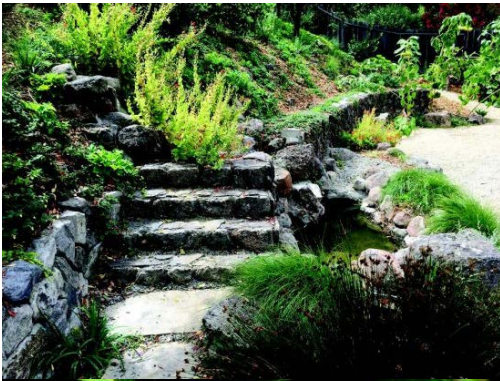
In his Oakland home, and now for 10 years in his Moraga home, McAlpine continues to view his property as a place to grow food for his family. He has organic compost delivered to break down the clay soil, and on all sides of the house he has set beds for his winter, then the summer crops of vegetables. The rest of the property was designed as a native garden by Four Dimensions Landscape Company, and the fruit trees are growing happily in their midst.

Chambers explains that she and her husband have been going to the Bringing Back the Natives tour for years and got some of their inspiration there. She cites Al Kytes' garden, also in Moraga and also on the tour again this year, that has a water feature that inspired both of them to add one to their property. The pleasant watery gurgle adds to the serenity of a garden, which though it is not very large, has been conceived as a peace haven for them.

Under the rustic wooden veranda stands some of the furniture made by McAlpine with wood coming from the property. Birch branches have been turned into tables, and an old cherry tree provided boards to create benches. Chambers says with a smile that she has to protect her non-fruit trees so her husband does not turn all of them into something useful, like furniture.

The tour is a great source of inspiration for those interested in local plants set in the gardens of ordinary but creative and passionate people. The theme this year is Music and Art in the Garden, and the Chambers-McAlpine's will host Stanley Middle School's Jazz Messengers. McAlpine will give a talk and share secrets for a successful orchard. One of them is their backyard cat, a semiferal but friendly feline that lives outside and keeps the rodents and squirrels at bay, so the Chambers-McAlpine can really enjoy their fruit.

Registration is necessary for the free tour at <https://www.bringingbackthenatives.net/>. The tour includes a free Garden Art and Native Plant Extravaganza from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, May 4 and 5, at various native plant nurseries in the East Bay. A percentage of the proceeds from the sale of plants at these nurseries will be donated to the Bring Back the Natives Garden Tour.



Lemons



Figs



At Kyte's Moraga garden is a popular stop on the Tour. Photo Kathy Kramer

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[back](#)

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