

How Peninsula residents have transformed their yards with native gardens

BY [JULIA BROWN](#), MARCH 29, 2023, 1442 VIEWS

The free Growing Natives Garden Tour April 1-2 enables the public to visit over 40 private and public gardens landscaped with California native plants. Here are three you can see for yourself.



Ceanothus Puget Blue in Elaine Salinger's San Mateo garden. Photo by Devin Roberts.

A [rise](#) in gardening and home improvement projects brought on by early pandemic shelter-in-place orders has also spurred interest in native gardening. While some gardeners have spent decades touting the ecological benefits of native plants – the [California Native Plant Society](#) itself was founded over a half-



tolerant plants are [native plants](#),” says Penny Pollock, coordinator for the steering committee behind the Growing Natives Garden Tour in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties. “That’s one reason why we have the tour: to stress the value and beauty of going native, especially the habitat value. Butterflies are disappearing, bird numbers are dropping down; all that relates to not having insects to eat. The butterflies give us caterpillars that birds feed their babies. A lot of the local birds and butterflies won’t use them (non-native plants). A lot of them are specialists and go to certain types of plants, so it’s critical to the ecology of our country to grow native plants...without the birds and bees and butterflies, crops don’t get pollinated.”

More than 40 private and public Peninsula gardens landscaped with California native [plants](#) will be open to the public for free, in-person tours from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturday, April 1, and Sunday, April 2, as part of the 21st annual Growing Natives Garden Tour (formerly known as the Going Native tour). [Advance online registration](#) is required to participate and get tour maps with addresses. Saturday tours will include Santa Clara, Cupertino, Saratoga, Campbell, Los Gatos, San Jose, Morgan Hill and Gilroy. Sunday tours will focus on properties in Woodside, Portola Valley, San Carlos, Redwood City, Mountain View, Los Altos, Palo Alto, San Mateo and Sunnyvale.

Gardens range in size from 500 square feet to just over an acre, with some as young as a year old and several that were established over 20 years ago. The oldest, the Woodside Library’s native plant garden, is 53 years old, according to tour organizers.

“(Attendees) get to see pretty plants, nice gardens and meet lots of nice people,” Pollock says. “All the garden owners are pretty enthusiastic about native plants and can answer a lot of questions. Since we have so many styles and types of gardens, people can pick what they want to do with their yard.”

The Six Fifty checked out three gardens on the tour and spoke with participants about what motivated their decisions to garden with native plants and what advice they’d give people who are considering doing the same. To get the complete tour directory, including photos and descriptions of participating gardens, visit the [Growing Natives Garden Tour website](#). The page also includes links to gardens from previous years, information on other native garden tours and gardener resources.



Elaine Salinger has had a native plant garden for around 20 years. Photo by Devin Roberts.

A half-acre habitat for wildlife

Elaine Salinger has called San Mateo home for over 30 years and has spent about two decades gardening with native plants.

“When you come to our yard, we have flowers that are blooming; it’s just alive with pollinators,” she says. “The neighbors’ yards look very nice and they’re very manicured, but they’re dead zones.”

The half-acre garden was created in 2011 and renovated in 2017. The front yard, which was previously covered with English ivy, now features several tall manzanitas and tall Santa Barbara wild lilac. Native plants underneath include canyon sunflower, California fuchsia and many types of buckwheat. The back garden includes a sitting area, a frog pond and a lower hillside that Salinger has been restoring over the last three years by removing non-native invasive species. The hillside is now home to a wide variety of natives, from blue iris and yarrow to California dandelions and blue-eyed grass.



Elaine Salinger and Chris Ketner's San Mateo home. Photo by Devin Roberts.

The entire yard has been planted in cages to combat gophers. All of the rainwater that falls on the upper part of the yard is captured in a system Salinger's husband Chris Ketner installed; when it rains half an inch, she says, they save at least 500 gallons of water. As a result, they don't use any tap water for gardening. They also use misters instead of a dripper system to conserve water.

"I'm a water advocate," Salinger says. "You should never let water run off your yard into the storm drain. If you can keep the water on your property, it will feed the trees and plants and minimize the amount of watering you have to do."

A landscaper installed 10%-20% of the plants, but Salinger and Ketner did the rest.



Hummingbirds in Elaine Salinger and Chris Ketner's San Mateo garden. Photo by Devin Roberts.

"You don't need an expensive landscaper," she says. "Once you remove non-native invasives and put in your native plants you're pretty much done. It's so low-maintenance it's crazy."

Salinger says she has "too many" favorite plants in her garden to name, but she loves buckwheat and manzanita species.

"It's so easy to make things grow. The plants have adapted to the soil and weather here and require almost nothing," she says.



California buttercup in their garden. Photo by Devin Roberts.

Their home has been on the tour for about five years.

“It’s really fantastic to watch people get inspired and to spark their imaginations,” she says. “The reason I spend so much time on [climate change](#) is we don’t need to lose all that we love. I recognize that as much as I love and work on the garden and do the habitat restoration, it’s all for not if we can’t stop climate change.”

She says people should start by removing non-native plants, then installing big plants and filling in with smaller ones. Four key considerations are soil drainage, soil type, how much water you’re willing to use and how much sun or heat the plants will get.



Lewisia as a container plant. Photo by Devin Roberts.

“If you don’t have any garden at all, you can have native plants that attract pollinators in containers,” she adds. “I love lewisia, ferns (and) dudleya gnoma.”

“You’ll enjoy your garden much more when you can watch the life that’s attracted to it,” Salinger says.

Salinger Garden, San Mateo. See GNGT website for address and directions.



Linden Ellis stands behind one of two rain gardens in her Redwood City yard. Photo by Devin Roberts.

‘It’s more cheerful when you have lots of life around you’

Linden Ellis and her husband Andrew Clark moved to their Redwood City home in 2018 as “pretty novice gardeners,” Ellis says.

“We both had experience with vegetable gardens, but we hadn’t really been managing land ourselves,” she explains. “When we moved in, we took a throw mud against the wall approach initially trying to figure out what would survive and do well. Our backyard isn’t on the tour in part because it’s a little chaotic: We tried a lot, and some of it worked and some of it didn’t.”

After years of planning, they pulled the weeds that dominated their front yard and landscaped entirely with native plants. The 1,000-square-foot garden features two functional rain gardens lined with colorful boulders. It also utilizes a laundry-to-landscape gray water reuse system and 100-gallon rain barrels. Native plants include Big Sur manzanita, deer grass, coffee berry, St. Catherine’s lace buckwheat and Verbena lilacina De La Mina.



One of two rain gardens in Linden Ellis and Andrew Clark's Redwood City yard. Photo by Devin Roberts.

Ellis and Clark did the installation themselves and consulted with Yerba Buena Nursery in Half Moon Bay on the design.

"One of the things I learned is how much soil you need," Ellis says. "Our garden was flat in the front all the way to the front yard and she looked at that and said, 'You need 9 yards of soil'...It totally packed down, and the plants do much better when you have really good soil at their feet."

Ellis says they gravitated toward native plants because they like California and appreciate that they live in a "biodiversity hot spot." Impacts of climate change also strengthened her desire to have a garden full of plants and animals.



St. Catherine's lace buckwheat and lilac Verbena De La Mina in Linden Ellis and Andrew Clark's Redwood City yard.

Photos by Devin Roberts.

"Coming from the East Coast, there's so many species found only here in the Peninsula and in California," she says. "That made me want to get as many of those species into our proximity as possible. The second motivation was that it's more cheerful when you have lots of life around you...There's so many species disappearing from the planet, I just want to be surrounded by lots of animals, and plants are of course the base of that; without the plants you don't get any animals."

Ellis says her favorite plants are the two redbird dogwoods, which are a smaller variety of the wild kind.

"I've never seen one in a native garden before," she says. "When they drop their leaves their stems are really red, and it looks really natural."



Linden Ellis and her husband Andrew Clark installed the native landscaping themselves. Photo by Devin Roberts.

This is the first year their home will be on the Growing Natives Garden Tour. Ellis is looking forward to talking to people about what they've learned and "who else in the neighborhood cares about native plants."

"We didn't do anything right on the first try and it was still so fun," she says. "We learned a lot, we killed a few plants, but we're getting there."

Crowing Hen Garden, Redwood City. See GNGT website for address and directions.



Jennifer and Brian Dirking in their San Carlos garden. Photo by Devin Roberts.

Creating a ‘restaurant’ for birds, bees and butterflies

Jennifer and Brian Dirking had “your typical lawn and English box hedge” upon moving to San Carlos in 2007, says Jennifer Dirking.

“There was no life in it,” she says. “It didn’t sustain any wildlife, butterflies or bees, but we were both working so much we didn’t pay attention to the fact it was an ecological desert from a native plant standpoint.”

Like many during the COVID shutdown in 2020, Dirking and her husband turned to gardening and reached out to a few garden designers to get the ball rolling. Because of pandemic restrictions, however, they found it difficult to get any professional help, so they started doing their own research. They searched their zip code on [Calscape.org](https://www.calscape.org) to see what plants would work best in their region and did the design and installation themselves.



The valley oak tree in Jennifer and Brian Dirking's San Carlos garden helps support caterpillar and local bee species.
Photo by Devin Roberts.

The centerpiece of the 600-square-foot garden is the valley oak tree, which is considered a "keystone plant" that supports 90% of the caterpillar species that enable terrestrial birds to reproduce as well as specialist native bee species, according to tour organizers. Native plants underneath the oak include red flowering currant, iris, Catalina currant and hummingbird sage. The patio is surrounded by monkey flower, manzanita, wooly blue curls and salvia pozo blue.

"It's been fun," Dirking says. "We've been able to keep adding to it over time. Getting plants in Richmond or Mill Valley has been like field trips."

She says she especially loves the manzanita, which blooms early in the year and provides nutrition for local bees, and flowering currants that feed caterpillars, which are critical for baby terrestrial birds.



Pink flowering currant in Jennifer and Brian Dirking's San Carlos garden. Photo by Devin Roberts.

"We have an explosion of birds in our yards and see more caterpillars and moths," Dirking says.

She adds that the oak tree is the "No. 1 thing people should plant if they want to have biodiversity in their backyard."

"We fought a revolution against imperialism with England and yet they won: We have 40 million acres of lawn," Dirking says. "It's the largest crop in America and it feeds nothing."



Jennifer Dirking has given away 3,000 native seed packets through Nextdoor and will have more on hand for the tour. Photo by Devin Roberts.

Dirking's foray into native gardening inspired her to start giving away native plant seed packets on Nextdoor. Emblazoned with an "Ecogardenista" sticker (also the name of a [gardening blog](#) she started in 2021), Dirking says she's distributed 3,000 of the packets so far and will have more on hand for the tour. They're also planning to give a talk at 11:30 a.m. and 3 p.m. Sunday for visitors called, "Creating a Restaurant for Bees, Butterflies and Birds."

This is the first time the Dirking's home will be on the tour.

"My husband and I are both really enthusiastic and excited about sharing what we've learned as newbies," she says. "We're in our 50's and we've become wildlife photographers going out there and taking pictures of the bees and butterflies, and it ignited a passion for gardening we didn't have before."



Blue-eyed grass in Jennifer and Brian Dirking's San Carlos garden. Photo by Devin Roberts.

She advises anyone who's looking to venture into gardening with native plants to use [Calscape.org](https://www.calscape.org), talk to people at native nurseries and watch online video lessons.

"I've finally shaken off the English imperialists and have the garden of my dreams," she says.

Bring Back Bay Area Bees, Butterflies and Birds Garden, San Carlos. See [GNGT website](https://www.gngt.org) for address and directions.

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