

An Imagined Chit Chat



Do you maintain the garden yourself? Yes.

That's a lot of work. Sometimes! But it's also very calming. If I'm anxious, I'll weed for 10 minutes and feel relieved.

How did you get into gardening? At first, I simply wanted things to look good. I wanted performance. I was a demanding audience, really. Then I kept learning more about plants and ecosystems. I started to "feel" gardening. I realized it wasn't all about me. I was just a part of things. I could contribute to a healthier environment. That redefined beauty in the garden.

This is getting philosophical fast. Yeah, what is beauty? A biodiverse, healthy ecosystem! So is the cycle of life and our associated seasons. Really, I'm just catching on to what the Chumash have known for 9,000 years.

All this from yardwork? I truly feel a part of nature in a way I hadn't before. I see California in a way I hadn't before. Our state has more native plant species than any other state in the U.S. – a third of which are found nowhere else on Earth! Now I see differently on a hike or even a drive. All thanks to our plants.

Sounds pretty highfalutin to me. I know! Plants are like a portal. They teach us about history, science, adaptability, human folly, interconnectedness, globalization... sigh.

Huh. It's changed my mindset. I used to "go" to nature. It was a designated area, like a hiking trail. Then I'd come home... to what? The tamed area? Now I feel a part of nature, which of course we all are. I feel a greater responsibility to nature.

Plants do that for you? California native plants especially. I love the idea of restoration and habitat gardening. I can plant the plants that were living in this very spot before Europeans came along and started throwing seed around and pouring cement over 54% of the U.S.¹ Local plants have co-evolved with other, local living things for millennia. It helps me feel more rooted—ahem—in these scattered times. Plant puns!

So it's not just about plants. Right. It's about biodiversity. It's about celebrating what is uniquely ours in our very specific zip code. A sense of place. It's about not only saving water, but also about promoting soil health. In one teaspoon of soil, there are more microbes than there are people on earth!² That's wild.

What have you observed in your garden? My mind. Also lots of birds (even an egret). I love quail! I've seen bunnies, snakes, lizards, foxes, deer, possums, raccoons, turkeys. But what I get most excited about are bugs.

Bugs? Yes, insects are the backbone (ha!) of our ecosystem. We seem intent on killing them, but without them our whole life collapses. So I select plants that I know will attract a variety of pollinators. That's one reason I'm really into buckwheat. Now when I see insects I'm like, welcome. Thank you. Please stay.

Fun & Frightening Facts

- ☞ The coast live oak trees in the backyard were "planted" by Western Scrub Jays. In other words, they're acorns the birds forgot that then sprouted in the rains. They're smart birds though! They can remember about 200 caches. They aim to pick spots that others are unlikely to find. This is metacognition! Like dolphins and apes!³
- ☞ Poachers have ripped metric tons of white sage out of California hillsides to bundle and sell as smudge sticks. Buying white sage is ethically fraught for many reasons.⁴
- ☞ Herbicides are damaging our watersheds and killing more than weeds.⁵
- ☞ Viewing plants altered EEG recordings and reduced stress, fear, anger and sadness, as well as reducing blood pressure, pulse rate and muscle tension in a Japanese study.⁶

Reliable Resources

- 🌸 Annie's Annuals
- 🌸 Bloom! California
- 🌸 California Native Plant Society
- 🌸 Calscape
- 🌸 Larner Seeds
- 🌸 Las Pilitas Native Plant Nursery
- 🌸 Santa Barbara Botanic Garden



Recommended Reading

- California Native Plants for the Garden
- Designing California Native Gardens
- Gardening with a Wild Heart
- The Landscaping Ideas of Jays

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¹ Plus 41% is now agriculture. Gardening for Life, Doug Tallamy (2009)

² Healthy Soil Microbes, Healthy People in The Atlantic (2013)

³ <https://birdfact.com/articles/what-do-scrub-jays-eat>

⁴ <https://daily.jstor.org/plant-of-the-month-white-sage/>

⁵ <https://www.usgs.gov/news/herbicide-glyphosate-prevalent-us-streams-and-rivers>

⁶ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6334070/#R4>