HOW DOES A PASSION GROW? In my case, it was sparked because the county cleared out the drainage sump next to my house. When my family moved to Rosedale, it was still considered the outskirts of town. I could ride my horse down to the end of the block and be on dirt roads all the way to the river. Views of fields and mountains were unobstructed by anything except the haze. In the course of time those views changed: the dirt roads are now paved and punctuated with schools, shopping malls and homes. However, the drainage sump that was next to my house remained an area of wilderness. With sloped sides and an almost continual source of water, this little Eden was a mini botanical garden that acted as habitat for hordes of hummingbirds and a variety of other critters including the occasional possum, snake, or kestrel. In the bottom muck, cattails and sedges grew. A volunteer sycamore had grown at least 15 feet tall, its trunk a few feet up from the water level. Further up the slope, on the south facing side, a palo verde grew. Sunflowers, weeds and all kinds of other plants grew on the slopes of the sump. All was well with my little world.

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ONE summer a few years ago, the county decided it all had to go. I’m not sure why. But the outcome was not a pretty sight. A giant machine ripped up all the vegetation, leaving just a puddle at the bottom and bare slopes up the sides. At first, the impact on the critters wasn’t noticeable. A few more hummingbirds came to the feeders in my back yard, but they didn’t seem to be perturbed.
between the plants, the critters, and me. This habitat was created so the animals would have a place to live - but it gives me a place to live, too. It is more than just a garden. It gives me a quiet place to pray and think, where laundry, bills, or chores are far away. I can sit on a bench and quietly watch what is going on or putter happily. I’ve discovered which twigs are favored as hummingbird perches, which rocks are the favorites for sunning lizards and which vines the gulf fritillary caterpillars will eat by the end of summer. There is always something blooming, sprouting, or setting seed. No wonder I’ll go out for just a quick check and come back hours later with a smile on my face.

However, the wholesale clearing of habitat bothered me a lot. I decided to create a garden/habitat in my yard, so that the critters would always have a place and the county couldn’t come along and clear it out. Because of all the development in the neighborhood my horse no longer lived at home, so the now unused horse corral would become my California garden. I asked a local landscape designer draw up some plans, selecting plants that would attract hummingbirds and butterflies. I tweaked the plant selections a bit so natives would be emphasized, and looked at lots of native nursery Internet sites for plants that would be suitable. Plants would be considered suitable if they were native, or drought tolerant, or a food source to hummers and butterflies (caterpillar or adult) or provided shelter. If the plants fit all the requirements, so much the better. That first year, even though the garden was still very sparse, it was discovered by and populated with plenty of hummers and butterflies, along with bunches of lizards and toads, and once, even a visiting cottontail.

The fall migration after the sump was cleared revealed the numbers of hummers impacted by the loss of habitat. The garden was infested with swarms of hummers. The birds were zipping by within inches of my face, oblivious to my presence. They wouldn’t wait for me to put up the feeder, but would perch on it while it was still in my hand. I was enthralled. Come to think on it later, they were probably frantic since their migration accommodations had been ripped up, but that might be putting human emotions on an animal. In any case, my passion for native plant gardening and habitats came full bloom that fall.

In my California garden there is a connection