Native-Plant Gardening

The Learning Curve

by Monica Tudor

Looking at my garden now, you’d never suspect that I am really a plant-killer, somewhat reformed. My California garden is now even overgrown in some areas — hiding the painful memories of dozens and dozens of plants that met their demise at my hands. I could probably supply a small nursery with a year’s worth of plastic pots, except that I make a point of recycling them to hide the evidence.

Through trial and error, observation and experimentation, I’ve learned what will (usually) grow and what won’t, how to water and where to plant.

Remember, the garden started out as a horse corral. Horse manure and vegetables do marvelous things together. Horse manure and California native plants do not. Perhaps a more science-minded person could tell me if it was the manure or the urine or the alkali that did the natives in. In any case, some of the fatalities were certainly caused by over- or under-watering the plants. Although I tried to place the plants in a suitable site, some were simply doomed by being selected for the wrong garden. “Full sun” on a plant label does not always mean full sun in Bakersfield, even for a native.

The casualty rate during the first summer was about 90%. First to die were the toyons and manzanitas. The blue oak hung in for a year and then croaked too. Half of the sages clung to life but were looking

The happy survivors.
The Learning Curve (Continued)

around desperately for someone who would rescue them. Well, you get the idea. My learning curve was a wild looking roller coaster. The second winter after I planted the garden, Bakersfield was blessed with an exceptional amount of rain, which probably leached out the ground. The garden began to improve every year. At this point, any new plants have a pretty good chance of survival, but I’d be lying if I said I had it all figured out, even now, coming through the fourth winter.

But enough of the lamentations. The point is that a garden can grow anywhere; it is a matter of dirt, selecting the right plants and learning how to care for them. Through trial and error, observation and experimentation, I’ve learned what will (usually) grow and what won’t, how to water and where to plant. Most of the garden’s plants look pretty happy; some are exuberant! Even though this year’s colder winter has caused some die-back, every event teaches me more about the plants in my garden.

I’m still trying to grow manzanitas. I’ll keep you posted.

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