

Garden Tour Focuses on “You Can Do It” By Becky Miller-Cripps

The theme of this year’s tour is “You Can Do It.” The gardens demonstrate garden-enhancement projects that you can replicate in your own garden. In recent columns we’ve talked about sustainable gardening practices and growing roses without pesticides. Today we will focus on removing lawns, replacing them with native plants and repurposing items you may already have.



Becky Alexander and John Swanson moved to their property in 1999. For several years, while raising their daughters they simply left the property as they found it. Then, in 2008 they started a restoration project to diminish the size of their large lawns. They cut and removed the lawn from the center of the circular drive, widened the drive and reduced the lawn near the house.

The island in the center of the drive now focuses on plants that are “super easy to grow” in full sun, that are drought-tolerant and deer resistant, that bloom profusely and are native to either California or Mexico. Becky chose penstemons and sages (salvias) that needed no more than 15 minutes of drip irrigation twice a week.



Her garden philosophy is that the yard is not perfect and a garden is always in progress. The plants in the lawn replacement areas have arrived through a long, slow process of trial and error. Many have been planted, then moved to a better location. They are examples of survival of the fittest.

In keeping with the theme of the garden tour—“You Can Do It”—the Alexander/Swansons recently cut down a massive spruce and planted native plants in the area. The newly-installed drip irrigation system to the new natives will be left visible as an example of what can be replicated in anyone’s home garden. Master Gardeners will be on hand to answer any questions you may have.

Another philosophy embodied by the Alexander/Swanson garden is to repurpose any materials already on-site before buying new. The deer took many years to discover the vegetable garden in the backyard. When they did, Becky fashioned an ingenious, creative deer fence from materials she already had. Be sure to wander down the path to the left of the house, admiring the towering toyons as you go, to find the veggie garden with its repurposed deer fence. Also, be sure to admire the chicken coop and yard that John built using only hand tools. The hens are clearly content with his efforts!





If you need a break during the tour, The Master Gardener Demonstration Garden is a lovely spot where you can catch your breath. Snacks and drinks are available, along with public restrooms. Find a cool seat in the shade and rest a bit. Admire the blooming gardens full of native plants and check out the vegetable beds.

Several agencies, including the Foothill Collaborative for Sustainability (FoCuS) will offer tables of information for you to browse during your stop at the demonstration garden.

The Foothill Sierra Chapter of the California Native Plant Society and the Sierra Beekeepers Association will offer advice and information about restoring your garden with native plants in support of pollinators. And the Bonsai Club will instruct attendees how to grow a bonsai, as well as awarding a bonsai as a prize to one lucky attendee.

This year the four gardens on the tour offer a wealth of information. Come out to admire the gardens, ask questions of the Master Gardeners and home owners at each site and find out how to replicate a particular garden project in your own garden. "You Can Do It!"

Tickets will be available for sale on Sunday, at the Master Gardener demonstration garden at 251 S. Barretta Street in Sonora, CA. Prior to Sunday, tickets are available for sale at Columbia Nursery, Sonora Lumber, Nature's Whole Food Depot, The Nest, Antiques Etc, and the Farmory in Columbia.

Rebecca Miller-Cripps is a University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener of Tuolumne County.