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Water-wise Wonderland Retired librarian did her research to transform her thirsty landscape

By LINDA SULLIVAN BAITY, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT
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Editor's note: Master Gardens of Santa Barbara County is a new monthly feature that explores the gardens of UC Master Gardeners.

Although California's drought is officially over, water-saving measures are still a way of life for longtime Santa Barbara resident and UC Master Gardener Nancy Tobin. But it's impossible to tell from looking at the lush plantings encircling the house that she and husband Rich are dedicated minimalists when it comes to irrigation. Instead of a parched and barren vista, the Tobin landscape is bursting with color, variety and exuberant life.

When the couple moved into their cozy beach cottage on the Mesa seven years ago, they inherited the familiar suburban staples of grass, hedges, palm trees and "sporadic rocks." It didn't take them long to decide that drastic changes were needed to cut down on water usage and on the time and money required to keep their yard looking presentable. As both had recently retired — she from the Santa Barbara Unified School District after 12 years as elementary district librarian, he after 20 years with the National Forest Service — the last thing either wanted was to be tied down to mowing, edging, weeding, feeding and watering a lawn.

While contemplating their options, the Tobins immersed themselves in learning how to quickly and dramatically reduce their water consumption. They began by applying for a Smart Landscape Rebate from the city's water conservation program, which basically allowed them to start over from scratch. Their next step was a drastic one — all vegetation was removed from the property, except for a solitary orange tree in the back yard.

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Nancy Tobin's backyard garden features exciting colors, sizes, shapes and textures. RICH TOBIN PHOTOS



Five years before the transformation, the space was cluttered, uninspiring. RICH TOBIN PHOTOS

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"The front and back lawns disappeared in a single day," Mrs. Tobin recalls, "thanks to a hard-working crew with a sod cutter. We also added permeable borders to the asphalt driveway so the rain could percolate down into the soil instead of running off down the street."

Before planting could begin, the couple had to address the issue of irrigation. Drip lines were retrofitted with low-flow emitters, which reduced output from 1 gallon to gallon per hour. They then timed the controller to water a mere 10 minutes per week and held faithfully to that frugal schedule throughout the drought, providing only enough extra water to keep their 15 fruit trees alive. When the rains finally came this past winter, they enthusiastically switched off the system completely.

The couple took their time coming up with a design and researching low-water plants, spending many happy hours inspecting local gardens, surveying nurseries and checking out neighbors' yards. After finally settling on a plant list, they were wise enough to realize that new landscapes don't need to look finished immediately.

"We chose smaller specimens and left plenty of gaps between plants to give them room to grow," explains Mrs. Tobin. "It took a while for everything to fill in, but we really wanted to avoid ending up with an overgrown, crowded look. My advice to anyone putting in a new landscape is to be patient. Your garden will ask for what it needs. And don't be afraid to take something out that's not working."

Their front landscape is anchored by two marina madrones flanking the sidewalk, which are not only major design elements but furnish shade and privacy.

"We just love these trees — the multiple trunks, the beautiful red bark and shiny green leaves. Flowers in spring provide nectar for hummingbirds and fruit in the fall attracts mockingbirds."

In fact, Mrs. Tobin is so crazy about the trees that she has draped one of them in tiny white lights so she can continue to admire it at night. "It's so magical all lit up! We couldn't bear to take down the lights in the tree after the holidays, so now they're a permanent feature."

Her eclectic array of plants leans heavily in favor of drought-tolerant varieties that stay attractive year-round and encourage pollinators to visit. Hardy blooming perennials such as kangaroo paws, alstroemeria and yarrow mix with cheery blanket flowers and California poppies. Eye-popping combinations of drought-tolerant succulents, both planted in the ground and scattered about the yard in bright ceramic pots, add sweeps of contrasting color even when they're not in bloom — dark burgundy aeonium, pink dudleya, blue chalksticks, red pencil trees and lime-green sedum. A mounding annual borage won its place in this primarily evergreen landscape due to the droves of honeybees drawn to its starry blue blossoms from spring until fall.



In order from top to bottom, MASTER GARDENS of Santa Barbara County

Nancy Tobin, Santa Barbara

The passion vine's striking flowers attract butterflies and other pollinators.

Natives such as the Matilija poppy bush, center, give big impact with minimum water.

Mrs. Tobin prizes this towering 'Amistad' salvia, right, as a focal point of her garden.

LINDA SULLIVAN BAITY PHOTOS



The front landscape is anchored by two marina madrones flanking the sidewalk. This side yard garden off the kitchen is handy for picking fresh herbs.

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The hedges and gravel formerly on the west side of the house were replaced by a flagstone path, sword ferns, hot pink pentas and containers of edibles. Conveniently located within snipping distance of her kitchen, Mrs. Tobin's herb garden features basil, cilantro, thyme, dill, rosemary, lavender and catmint — grown as much for its lovely lavender flowers as for its aromatic foliage. Vegetables include Brandywine, red Siberian and cherry tomatoes; rainbow chard; blueberries; artichokes; and lettuce. The fence is covered by a vigorous passion vine, chosen because it's the host plant for many butterfly species, including the Gulf fritillary.

Perhaps the most dramatic transformation occurred in the back yard, which went from a sad mishmash of wood fencing, broken trellis, cement blocks and a swath of weedy turf to a soul-nourishing private sanctuary. The couple's well-planned haven has it all — cool shade, comfy seating, outdoor grill, hot tub, graceful arbor, bubbling fountain. But those amenities pale in comparison to Mrs. Tobin's dazzling, color-drenched garden — red Japanese maples and dwarf bottlebrush, golden milkweed, yellow calendula and sunflowers. A row of prized purple 'Amistad' salvia towers almost 8 feet tall despite regular pruning, and a native Matilija poppy bush sports its showy "fried-egg" flowers in the large raised bed where citrus, avocado, peach, plum and apples trees grow. Two of these trees are actually espaliered along the back fence — a clever pruning technique for limited spaces that trains young trees to grow flat against a wall or fence.

Hidden around the corner of the house is a state-of-the-art water catchment system, a key element in the couple's water-saving strategy. Three massive storage tanks installed earlier this year hold up to 1,000 gallons, and from every inch of rain that falls on the roof, the system can harvest 600 gallons of water for use during the dry summer months. Combining this with decorative rain chains to control the flow of rain from the gutters and French drains to capture even more rain and keep it in their yard, the Tobins have managed to decrease their total water consumption by two-thirds to three-quarters. Very impressive!

The couple are deservedly proud of their push toward sustainability, and they're not done yet. Future plans call for adding a new laundry-to-landscape system to capture and divert graywater from their washing machine out into the garden and undoubtedly cause their consumption rate — and their water bills — to drop even lower. Then there's that outdoor kitchen they've long dreamt about, which will give them even more reason to spend more time enjoying their low-water backyard wonderland.

Mrs. Tobin took her time and did her homework, and she urges others to do the same.

"If you're hesitant or new at gardening, take advantage of all the local educational programs that are available, such as UC Master Gardeners, WaterWise Santa Barbara and Sweetwater Collaborative. Do your own research to learn about native plants and pollinators. The more you know, the better you'll be." Spoken like a true librarian.

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Linda Sullivan Baity is program coordinator for the UC Master Gardeners of Santa Barbara County. Do you have questions about your home garden for the Master Gardeners? Contact the Helpline by calling 893-3485 or emailing anrmgsb@ucanr.edu. To find more gardening resources, go to cesantabarbara.ucanr.edu/Master_Gardener or www.facebook.com/sbmastergardeners.