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Adventures in botanical courage

One gardener's quest for knowledge, nerve and lots of pretty flowers

By LINDA SULLIVAN BAITY, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT
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MASTER GARDENS OF SANTA BARBARA COUNTY: Gary Kravetz, Santa Barbara

There once was a man named Gary

Whose garden was quite ordinary.

So he studied real hard

Then refashioned his yard.

Now it's gorgeous, which makes Gary merry!

Once upon a time, former electrical engineer and retired business owner Gary Kravetz moved his family into an idyllic storybook setting on a verdant hillside in the heart of Santa Barbara's chic Upper Riviera neighborhood. Their multilevel stucco house sits smack in the middle of two acres that had once been part of a vast mountaintop estate. At this point, the fairy tale's typically happy ending begins to falter.

"We moved from a much smaller house on a much smaller lot with a professionally designed yard that didn't need any attention from me," explains Mr. Kravetz. "Then all of a sudden, I have all this huge property to deal with and no idea even how to get started. The grounds were planted but everything was boring and mundane."

He knew he had to start making some big changes quickly.

That was 10 years ago. Mr. Kravetz had just turned 66 and was entitled to start taking it easy instead of taking up a daunting new challenge. For most folks, it would've been an ideal moment to kick back, play with the grandkids, and leave the dirty work of gardening to somebody else. But not our hero, who boldly set out

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A flowery welcome awaits visitors near the Kravetz front door.

GARY KRAVETZ PHOTO

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- "If that's the perception most people have, well,

on a quest to acquire enough information and confidence to tackle the radical transformation of his lackluster landscape.

Unlike the vast majority of gardeners, Mr. Kravetz did not have a lifelong interest in plants to draw upon. He was a city kid from Minnesota who knew nothing about gardening in California, which is why he decided to become a Master Gardener.

"I thought that taking their training classes might help me figure out how to deal with the overwhelming pressure I was feeling," he says. And he was right.

During his training, Mr. Kravetz learned to identify plants that do well in this area and how to take care of them, especially California natives and other drought-tolerant species, which opened up a whole new world of landscaping possibilities. He also learned about growing fruit trees and managing pests without using poisons, plus he gleaned enough about irrigation that he now teaches public education classes on the topic. Last but certainly not least, he learned about roses.

"Roses are beautiful, but they're also rugged and fairly easy to take care of," he says. His claim is at odds with the popular notion that roses are finicky and hard to manage. "I fertilize my rose once each month during the growing season, and trim each bush down to a couple of feet every year, which encourages them to put out lots of new buds in the spring. But I don't cut back the climbers — I just let 'em keep climbing."

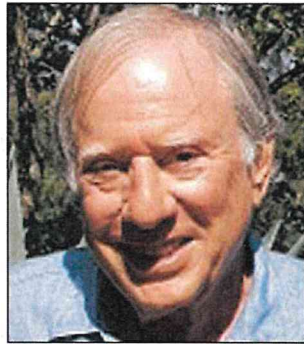
One of Mr. Kravetz's favorite roses is the delicate pink climber called 'Cécile Brünner' covering the wooden arbor that shelters his outdoor dining terrace. Other climbing varieties in his collection are the velvety red 'Don Juan' and the multihued 'Joseph's Coat' and 'Jacob's Robe.' A rainbow assortment of hybrid tea and floribunda rose bushes planted around the pool include russet 'Hot Cocoa,' orange 'Sunset,' yellow 'Flutterby' and pure white 'Iceberg.'

Mr. Kravetz chose their location deliberately. "We had to fence the pool area anyway, so I decided it would be a safe place to plant my roses. Deer happen to love roses — that's a lesson I learned the hard way and vowed never to repeat." He also learned the trick of choosing deer-resistant plants. "They don't like smelly things like sage and lavender, or plants with leaves that are tough or prickly, and they avoid chewing on leaves that taste bad, especially citrus."

That's fortunate because citrus trees are the centerpiece of Mr. Kravetz's prolific home orchard, featuring three each of grapefruit, orange and Meyer lemon trees, a tangerine, and 10 limes planted in an allée. Added to that are apples, apricots, guava, an Asian pear, a brown turkey fig and a pomegranate. ("One of those is enough!") Near the house, Mr. Kravetz has planted a whimsical mulberry bush within easy picking reach of little fingers.

In response to the drought, Mr. Kravetz used his newfound knowledge about low-

MASTER GARDENS of Santa Barbara County



Gary Kravetz
Santa Barbara



Top photo, orange cannas and blue agapanthus are a stunning combo.



Bottom photo, meet the garden that "designs itself."

that's unfortunate. I think we're more self-absorbed than we have ever been. And I think a lot depends on the environment you find yourself in. In Los Angeles, it's more 'How can you help me?' than 'How can I help you?' In a place like Santa Barbara, hopefully we're more community oriented and a little friendlier."

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water gardening to select plants with the best chance to survive. One example is the Island bush poppy, native to the Channel Islands, that thrives in full sun with very little water. Echimium is another of his smart drought-tolerant choices, plus the deer won't touch it. Succulents like rock purslane, giant blooming yucca and dozens of agave are punctuated by round tufts of spiky blue fescue, and a bed of massive California buckwheat, also known as St. Catherine's Lace, is a real head-turner.

Mr. Kravetz recently installed a gray water system that captures waste water from tubs, showers and bathroom sinks. It empties out into a flower bed full of variegated tropical cannas and agapanthus, which are delighted to have the extra water. There's even one large expanse behind a stone retaining wall devoted to native oaks, olive trees and rosemary ground cover that Mr. Kravetz swears needs no maintenance at all — zero!

A further concession to the drought was to take out two-thirds of the lawn, leaving only a small play area for his grandchildren. He also stopped growing vegetables when the drought got really bad. Only a few tomato plants and some grapevines remain. He dreams of being able to replant the vegetable garden someday soon, "but only if we get enough rain next winter that the rates start going down."

If this all sounds way too practical and planned to be fun, rest assured that there's also a creative and spontaneous side to Mr. Kravetz's gardening personality.

"My gardens basically design themselves," he states matter-of-factly. "When something dies and leaves a bare patch of ground, that's where my next plant goes."

He points to a beautiful black-eyed Susan in one of his more colorful flower beds. The only reason the bush is planted in that spot is because it caught his eye in the nursery one morning, so he bought it on impulse without worrying about where to plant it. "When I got it home, I saw a new empty space in the bed that was calling out to me. I let my garden show me what to do."

For Mr. Kravetz, the best part about gardening is the constant search for his next exotic discovery, like the prized Hong Kong orchid tree, with its flamboyant reddish-purple flowers, or the regal princess flower bush, which makes a striking show when decked out in clouds of purple blossoms. Mexican palo verde trees are commonplace in the desert but rare sights in Santa Barbara, which made Mr. Kravetz eager to acquire one, and he's equally proud of the coffee plant that appears to be thriving despite its tropical heritage.

Gary Kravetz has managed to transform himself into a gardening wizard and his landscape into a botanical paradise. The quest has taken him 10 years, but there's no sign that he'll be hanging up his trowel anytime soon because this hard-working, ever-curious student of gardening is now giving back to the program that has given him so much by mentoring new Master Gardener trainees. The adventure continues!

The moral of our story is clear and true.

It's never too late to learn something new.

This chapter ends but the future looks bright.



From top, the Hong Kong orchid tree brings a touch of the tropics; silvery agave leaves display distinctive patterns; regal princess flowers are ready to bloom.

LINDA SULLIVAN BAITY PHOTOS

For merry Gary's gardens of botanical delight.

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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.

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