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Backyard bounty Sustainable gardening practices yield delicious results

By LINDA SULLIVAN BAITY, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT
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The notion of sustainability appears with increasing frequency in our contemporary cultural dialogue, and not solely with respect to pressing environmental issues on a global scale. The term is also used to characterize decisions made by individuals who seek to live happy, harmonious, productive lives without damaging or depleting their personal environments. Elements of harmony, balance and social responsibility are tenets of this philosophy, which UC Master Gardener Ken Falstrom implements on a daily basis in his garden and in his life.

The incredible array of organic produce he harvests daily from his average-size suburban backyard is evidence that Mr. Falstrom is a genuine expert when it comes to successfully translating the principles of sustainable gardening into practical — and delectable — results. He lives and breathes sustainability, and judging from his beautiful, bountiful garden, this genial gentleman farmer really knows his stuff.

When Mr. Falstrom, a retired attorney and California native, purchased his brand-new house in the La Cumbre neighborhood back in 1981, the "landscaping" consisted of turf grass from fence to fence and one lonely oak tree near what is now the back fence. He had always enjoyed gardening as a hobby and had grown radishes and other common vegetables in a community garden, so it didn't take long after moving in to start planning how to make good use of his small slice of Santa Barbara clay. His first move was to add two more native oak trees and a couple of sycamore saplings, which, in retrospect, he admits was a terrible mistake.

"Don't ever plant trees," he warns anyone who'll listen, "unless you're sure about how

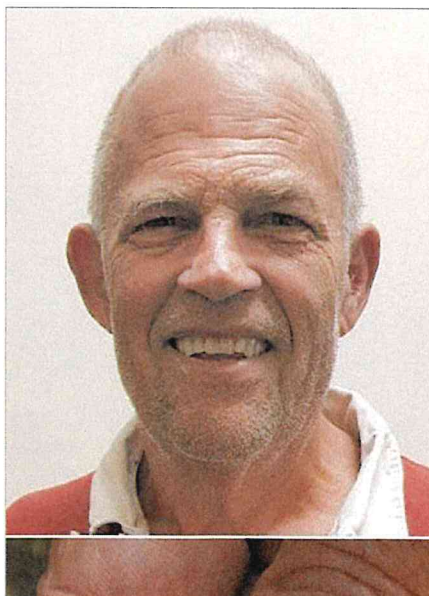
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When UC Master Gardener Ken Falstrom purchased his brand-new house in the La Cumbre neighborhood in 1981, the "landscaping" consisted of turf grass from fence to fence. He has since sustainably transformed the landscape.
LINDA SULLIVAN BAITY PHOTO



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big they're eventually going to get! I didn't do that, and now they're 40 years old and much too large for my yard."

Not only do they require constant severe pruning to keep encroaching limbs away from power lines, their deep shade and dense root balls drastically limit which plants can survive beneath them. But rather than hiring an arborist to cut down and haul away the pruned branches, Mr. Falstrom instead chooses to "chop and drop." Any material removed from his trees or shrubs becomes mulch for the very same trees and shrubs from whence they came — a perfect example of sustainability in action.

As the trees grew in, his lackluster lawn slowly started dying back until it finally disappeared entirely, and because the grass-to-garden transition happened so gradually, Mr. Falstrom had plenty of time to plan, to study and to explore the endless possibilities for what would become the magnificent edible landscape he presides over today.

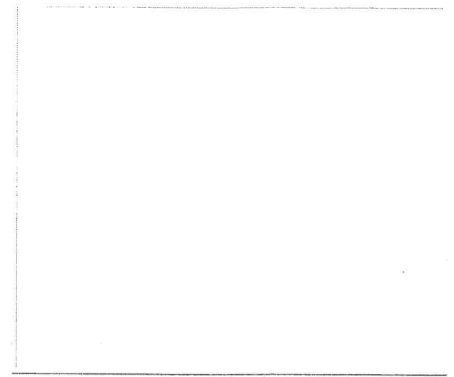
For those who might hesitate to put in a vegetable garden or home orchard because they fear they won't have enough room to grow very much on a tiny city lot, take heart. The Falstrom property is only one-third of an acre and yet he proudly proclaims, "I've eaten something I've grown myself every day for the last 12 years."

The list of edibles that populate Mr. Falstrom's abundant garden is long and impressive, including 15 fruit trees and hundreds of individual plants producing more than 30 different kinds of vegetables, herbs and fruits. In addition to cucumbers, tomatoes, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, artichokes, corn, squash, melon, cabbage, beets, eggplant, lettuce, celery, fennel, leeks and tomatillos, he also grows three types of pole beans and 18 types of peppers, including serrano, cayenne, habanero, bell and ancho.

Plump blueberries flourish in large containers to control soil acidity, alongside strawberries, pineapple guava, passion fruit vines, blackberry and raspberry bushes. The orchard includes dwarf apples, navel and Valencia oranges, lemons, cherry, loquat, fig, lime, pomegranate, apricot, tangerine, guava, grapefruit, peach and an avocado Mr. Falstrom rescued from the side of the road. There's even a young cherimoya tree that simply popped up one day and was kindly allowed to stay.

"Anything that volunteers, I leave alone because it obviously knows better than I do when and where it wants to grow."

Lest you're left with the impression that Mr. Falstrom doesn't grow anything he can't consume, the inventory of his ornamentals is also quite substantial. California native plants such as poppies, fuchsia, buckwheat, yarrow, goldenrod, Humboldt lilies and Bee's Bliss sage provide colorful flowers and food for pollinators. Also scattered about the yard are old-fashioned favorites such as freesia, geranium, marigolds, dahlia, narcissus, plumbago, yellow mallow,



four-o'clocks, and even a few tropicals such as ginger, canna, hibiscus and cymbidiums.

In 2008, Mr. Falstrom became a Master Gardener, which boosted his horticultural acumen considerably. He learned more about growing both edibles and ornamentals and was pleased to connect with a community of like-minded souls who provide him with lots of encouragement and camaraderie. The program also provides him with a great place to spend his Wednesday afternoons — La Huerta garden at the Santa Barbara Mission. Mr. Falstrom leads the team of Master Gardener volunteers who gather weekly to maintain the historic garden and orchard and to share their expertise with visitors touring the museum. Working at La Huerta garden is a unique opportunity for Mr. Falstrom and his colleagues to learn about the history of California agriculture by tending the rare and heirloom plants, many of which date back to the Mission era (1769-1836).

Mr. Falstrom also appreciates the chance to obtain seeds and cuttings from some of the historic plants at La Huerta as by-products of routine maintenance, which he saves and transplants into his own garden. A notable example is the lush vine of Mission grapes scrambling over an arbor in his backyard that by mid-summer is teeming with bunches of dark purple heirloom fruit. Mission grapes were the first variety ever planted in California, and, in fact, they were the only grapes grown in the state until the mid-19th century. Originally brought from Spain to Mexico, they were planted in every mission by the Franciscans beginning in 1769 to use for sacramental wine, and now a descendant of those iconic vines is thriving in Mr. Falstrom's 21st-century backyard. How's that for sustainability??

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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.

FYI

Would you like to learn from local experts about how to care for your backyard fruit trees? Join Ken Falstrom and other Master Gardeners for their annual Winter Deciduous Pruning & Gardening Clinic from 9:45 a.m. to 1 p.m. Dec. 2 at La Huerta Garden at the Santa Barbara Mission, 2201 Laguna St. Due to space restrictions, the free public workshop is limited to 30 participants. Advance registration is strongly suggested. For more details and to register online, visit



In order from top to bottom, the backyard of the Falstrom home. The property is only one-third of an acre and yet Mr. Falstrom proudly proclaims, "I've eaten something I've grown myself every day for the last 12 years."
Christmas lima beans, Brussels sprouts, blueberries.

LINDA SULLIVAN BAITY PHOTO



Above, corn and cosmos. **KEN FALSTROM PHOTOS**



Ken Falstrom, who volunteers at the Santa Barbara Mission's historic La Huerta garden, is able to obtain seeds and cuttings from some of the plants as by-products of routine maintenance. One of the examples is the lush vine of Mission grapes scrambling over an arbor in his backyard.
KEN FALSTROM PHOTO

California natives such as poppies, fuchsia, buckwheat, yarrow, goldenrod, Humboldt lilies and Bee's Bliss sage provide colorful flowers and food for pollinators.

LINDA SULLIVAN BAITY PHOTO

http://cesantabarbara.ucanr.edu/Master_Gardener/. For more information, call the Master Gardener Helpline at 893-3485 or email anrngsb@ucanr.edu.