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Beauty and the Bees

Lush Goleta hillside is home to a real honey of a garden

By LINDA SULLIVAN BAITY NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT
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The stunning half-acre property belonging to Master Gardener Barbara Hughes and her husband, Willie, is undeniably lovely to look at, but beauty is only one of its many desirable features. Their cleverly designed landscape is also easy to care for, bursting with delicious edibles, friendly to bees and other critters, and decidedly unfriendly to wildfire. That's a lot to expect from one small plot of suburban earth and a lot to be learned from its talented and dedicated creator.

When the Hughes family moved into their home in the Goleta foothills in 1998, they found nondescript hedges, scattered birds of paradise, and grass growing everywhere else. Although they decided to keep some lawn, most of the turf has since been replaced with wide, curving beds in the front and side yards and a neatly terraced slope across the rear of the lot. The home's previous owner was an avid orchid enthusiast with a backyard full of prized specimens Ms. Hughes had hoped to inherit. Sadly, she was left with only a few "poor man's orchids," which look like their exotic namesakes but are much less finicky to grow.

Today, those copycat orchids flourish beneath the branches of an unusually robust ficus tree that's grown far larger than she originally expected. "Since becoming a Master Gardener, I've learned the importance of researching the mature size of a plant before you put it in the ground. I've had to relocate way too many plants that I put in the wrong place," she admits.

To complement her feisty ficus, Ms. Hughes has planted a wide variety of palm trees —

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The Hughes property in Goleta is designed to attract pollinators. "Most people don't realize that bees produce one-third of our food, not just the fruits and vegetables we eat," says Master Gardener Barbara Hughes, who keeps beehives.

LINDA SULLIVAN BAITY/NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

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more than a dozen species to be precise, including kings and queens, fishtails and fans, kentias and robellinis. The palms provide height and visual interest to the front yard, plus they bring a laid-back tropical vibe to the garden. Ms. Hughes has christened "my little paradise."

Clinging to the multiple trunks of the ficus tree are clusters of spidery tillandsias and nearby, nestled in the dappled shade, stand two beehives that are abuzz with apian activity. One is a Langstroth hive, the typical box containing hanging frames where bees nest at the bottom of the box and the honey is at the top. Most beehives are white but this one is painted a pale sky blue, which makes it blend in nicely with its surroundings. On the other side of the tree is a horizontal box sitting atop sawhorse legs called a top-bar hive, which the bees enter from the back and store their honey in the front. This type of hive is less disruptive to the bees and safer for beekeepers at harvest time.

Ms. Hughes raises bees not just for the delicious honey they supply for her family and friends, but also as her personal contribution toward sustaining our fragile ecosystem.

"Most people don't realize that bees produce one-third of our food, not just the fruits and vegetables we eat but also the dairy products. Think about it: cows eat alfalfa and bees pollinate alfalfa. They need each other to survive, so we should all be growing plants that attract and nourish our neighborhood bee colonies. Please feed the bees!"

Ms. Hughes serves up a tasty menu of both nectar and pollen-producing trees, shrubs and edibles for her bees to feast upon. After a towering Italian stone pine was taken out several years ago by beetles, Ms. Hughes replaced it with a silk oak, which isn't a true oak but the largest member of the genus *Grevillea*. Native to Australia, silk oaks (also called "Santa Barbara lyre trees") are prized for their pyramidal shapes, lacy foliage and especially for the showy, nectar-laden blossoms that cover the branches each spring.

Bees are also drawn to the bubbling fountain made from a giant boulder, as well as to the curved bloom spikes of the foxtail agaves and the fragrant white flowers of the brugmansia. Perennials such as geranium, salvia, fortnight lily and agapanthus are reliable sources of pollen year-round, as is the ice plant that blankets the north-facing hillside.

In the backyard, an orchard features apple, avocado, kumquat, mango, guava, fig, lemon, tangelo, lime and blood orange trees, providing a steady stream of enticing blossoms to attract pollinators. Raised vegetable beds contain newly planted asparagus, as well as chard, kale, eggplant, peppers and herbs. A humongous Sungold cherry tomato bush survives from last year but Ms. Hughes can't bear to pull it out yet because it's covered in new blossoms — in February!



MASTER GARDENS: Santa Barbara, County
Barbara Hughes
Middle photo, a front-yard bed features a fountain and palms.

Bottom photo, purple lantana and red geranium on a terraced back slope.



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Ms. Hughes, 60, has lived in Santa Barbara County since she was a year old, so she was well-aware of the dangers posed by wildfire even before moving to Goleta. Along with more than 5 million other Californians who reside in the vulnerable wildland-urban interface, the Hughes have had their share of close calls, most notably during the Gap Fire in 2008 when they evacuated while watching flames race across the mountain toward their house. Last year's Whittier Fire posed a potential threat but, luckily, the winds cooperated and kept the flames from spreading in their direction.

Fire would have a hard time gaining ground in the Hughes yard, however, which showcases a number of smart fire-safe choices. For starters, hardscaping abounds, from the wide flagstone drive and front walkway, to the stones edging the flower beds. Coated chain-link fencing, cement roof tiles, a generous low-fuel green zone surrounding the house, the absence of leaf litter and dry undergrowth, and the use of gravel mulch instead of wood chips are all excellent fire safety measures.

The bulk of the plants on the Hughes property are located well away from the house, and the foundation plantings next to the house are primarily succulents, which are among the most fire-resistant plants of all because they store water in their leaves and contain very small amounts of flammable oil. Ms. Hughes has succulents planted everywhere in her yard because she loves how they look and how easy they are to grow. As far as she's concerned, their fire-resistance is but an extra added attraction.

Ms. Hughes' "little paradise" succeeds on multiple levels. It's a model of beauty, abundance, sustainability and safety. The bees are happy and so is she.

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 tocesantabarbara.ucanr.edu/Master_Gardener or www.facebook.com/sbmastergardeners.

FYI

Join the Master Gardeners for a free public workshop entitled "Growing Orchids in Santa Barbara" from 10:30 to 11:30 a.m. March 3 at the Central Library, Faulkner Gallery, 40 E. Anapamu St. For more information, call 893-3485.



Top photo, fragrant showstopper Brugmansia (Angel's trumpet).
Bottom photo, a collection of tillandsias clinging to a giant ficus tree.