

To help save the environment, think globally but act locally in your backyard with native plants

You can make your backyard a national park, one plant at a time

By **ANISSA RIVERA** |

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A desert-style zone with native wild flowers, bunchgrasses and cacti in this Highland Park garden. (Courtesy of the Theodore Payne Foundation for Wild Flowers and Native Plants)

How can you save the Earth from your backyard? First step: click on a Zoom link. It was there I met six wildly impressive people who are experts in our planet, from ecology, horticulture to all things wildlife.

Susan Gottlieb of the Gottlieb Native Garden was there, with Diane Shader Smith, an accidental environmentalist inspired by her late daughter Mallory. Will Battersby, who wrote and produced “Salt in My Soul,” the documentary about Mallory’s life with cystic fibrosis, talked about how Mallory’s passion for the environment inspires him.

Scott Logan of Wild Wings Ecology came too, as did Lili Singer, a horticulturist and writer. Author Doug Tallamy, professor of agriculture at the University of Delaware, spoke about his grassroots campaign for everyone to plant native plants and restore biodiversity in their neighborhoods.

Beth Pratt, California regional executive director for the National Wildlife Federation, is the lady who raised \$87 million to build a freeway overpass to help animals such as cougars cross safely. Garry George, director of the Clean Energy Initiative of the Audubon Society, played moderator. All of these intelligent and inspired people working tirelessly for natural causes had one overriding message: you there, with the sad patch of a garden, you can save the Earth too.

“It’s all connected, isn’t it?” Pratt, the cougar crossing lady, asked. “(For the wildlife crossing) we started with the small things, mushrooms, to base a healthy functional ecosystem. We start with the fundamentals. You wouldn’t have mountain lions in the landscape without native plants. And it’s wondrous to contemplate finding the Gottlieb Native Garden (this National Wildlife Federation-Certified Backyard Wildlife Habitat) in a very unlikely place like Beverly Hills.”

In the past, we’ve only asked our gardens to be pretty, said Doug Tallamy.

“Now they have to support life, sequester carbon, feed pollinators and manager water,” he said. Tallamy’s call to action, at homegrownnationalpark.org, believes conservation is everyone’s responsibility.

Susan Gottlieb simply wanted to conserve water in her garden when she first started to dig in her Beverly Hills home 30 years ago.

“My husband Dan asked me, ‘Why are you pulling out all this perfectly good ivy?’” she laughed. “But he appreciates it now. It’s almost a surprise that it’s done what it’s done. I had no clue how important it was when I started it. It started as a water conservation project, then it became feed the birds, feed the caterpillars, feed the other insects. I learned by trial and error and I’m pretty proud of it. I was gobsmacked by the diversity.”

Gottlieb regularly offers tours of her garden and opens it up for scientists such as Scott Logan of Wild Wings Ecology. He applauds one upside to the pandemic, that people started to enjoy the outdoors more.

“Our souls are missing something when we disconnect from nature,” he said. “Go out into a garden and sit down and be quiet and see what happens. It really fills you.”

Horticulturist Lili Singer believes even the least-green thumbs can help.

“First, consider what your priorities are,” she said. “What is it you want your garden to do, and keep the plants that are there that might be compatible with native plants. Get things as local as possible. What is native to your space? Start small. Plant a pot of native wildflowers and you’ll see them bloom in a couple of months. Go to your local mountains and see what grows there, but don’t take them from the wild. (In your garden) pull some weeds. The most mundane tasks can be life-affirming.”

The conservationists recommend starting small and doing your homework. Two excellent sources are the Theodore Payne Foundation, theodorepayne.org, a Sun Valley-based nonprofit that specializes in growing native plants. The California Native Plant Society, at cnps.org, is another resource.

It is awe-inspiring to think that California has more than 5,500 native plant species, 40 percent of which grow nowhere else on Earth. So we’re blessed to be here.

“Slow down, sit down on a rock and look close,” Singer said. “It’s a wonder what you will see sitting still in the garden. And it can be a time for human connectedness, too.”

The double crises in our climate and the threat to our biodiversity is human-caused, Pratt said.

“But we can all help with that,” she said. “Nature has spent millions of years getting it right, before we (caused) this lasting damage to our ecosystem. We’re coming to terms with it, and hopefully, good will come out of this. Look at what’s possible.”

We can plant, we can weed, we can hope.

Other resources for more information include saltinmysouldoc.com and calscape.org