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GOING GREEN

DIARY OF A MAD GARDENER

Behold, the unearthed journal entries of a woman caught up in a labyrinthine scheme to infest her front lawn with a superior race of drought-tolerant flora...

BY ANNIE SPIEGELMAN, THE DIRT DIVA



Spiegelman, learning that never-promised-you-a-native-garden lesson the hard way.

NOVEMBER 2007

Today I was accepted by the North Marin Water District as one of five homeowners in its "front lawn removal project." The water district will help me get rid of my old parched lawn and I get to look like a concerned and responsible do-gooder. Score!

All I have to do is replace the lawn with native and drought-tolerant plants. My neighbors were curious in the past when they saw me in the bed of my pickup truck in my red polka-dot boots, blasting my iPod and shoveling aged horse manure into my yard. Now, with the ubiquitous rectangular front lawn missing from my suburban lot, they can rest assured they live next door to a Communist.

But once others see how established natives are more pest resistant, attract butterflies and hummingbirds, survive solely on rainfall and little summer water, and thrive without fertilizer, they'll be green with envy—and all the better for it. Note to self: Remind the water district's conservation coordinator, Ryan Grisso, to stay out of my spotlight and let me take all the credit for this revolutionary idea. This is going to be a great project. I can just feel it.



Matt Buchholz combines inspired landscape design with near-flawless penmanship.

menting, "Wow, you'd think something would be blooming in your yard, you being a Master Gardener and all." I explain a garden needs to rest and go dormant in the winter and so does a gardener. I'm still weary from my New Year's resolution to wean myself off sugar and caffeine, and distraught from everyone's contrary remarks, so I pour the remnants of a bottle of Baileys into my morning coffee and go out to turn the compost pile. There, under the redwood trees, turning the dark crumbly organic matter with a pitchfork and sipping my Peet's coffee, I come to the realization that it doesn't get much better than this. And with that I instantly forgive.

Matt comes to the house to take measurements of the front yard. He starts talking about the necessary design elements and then takes out his notebook and starts listing names of plants. Barry White music fills my head, and once more I'm mesmerized by his perfect handwriting. His pencil glides across the paper as he writes 'Ribes sanguineum,' 'Salvia mellifera' and 'Rudbeckia californica.' I then add 'Romneya coulteri' because I'm madly in love with this 6-foot-tall plant with summer flowers that resemble fried eggs. Matt recommends blue-eyed grass for the borders. I accept his recommendation, but in truth, I have no idea what it looks like. I agree

because I like the species name 'Quaint and Queer.' And...I just have to see how he'll shape his Qs.

MARCH 2008

Today Matt's crew excavated the 400-square-foot front lawn. I stood around and looked busy filming this historic day while serving lime popsicles. I feel so empowered by ending this codependent relationship with my lawn. I did all the work. I kept reading books and magazine articles on how to fix all the lawn's problems. I did all the worrying, analyzing and processing. All that son-of-a-turf did was sit there, self-absorbed, drinking and succumbing to rust and thatch. I don't need that. I'm a diva. I need all of my time and thoughts to be about me.

Tomorrow the crew will lay down four paths of decomposed granite and the brick work in the center circle. The design resembles a potager garden, which is a traditional French garden style where the plot is divided into quadrants and filled with vegetables, herbs and flowers. Mine will be filled with drought-tolerant and native plants, with the exception of a few seasoned majestic English roses I just can't seem to part with.

I'm only ready to tackle one codependent relationship at a time. > 21

GOING GREEN



The Diva's front lawn, November '07...



...the Diva's front lawn, May '08

< 18 Diary of a Mad Gardener
APRIL 2008

Today I tagged along with Matt as we visited Cal Flora and Emerisa Nursery to purchase the necessary natives. After a few hours of plant shopping, I am exhausted but Matt keeps going strong. We walk around Emerisa Nursery for what seems like days and endless miles. I'm

The mounting anxiety makes me crave more Halloween chocolate. When was Halloween? Yikes, this candy is old.

tired and envious of the cheery worker-bees driving around in their shaded motorized carts. It's hot and sunny and I start to get cranky. Matt, however, wants to visit another nursery. Three hours of reading Latin nametags has drained all the horticultural joy from my botanically obsessed brain. I tell him I need to stop or I'll car-

jack a cart, and it won't be pretty. I'm craving chocolate-covered espresso beans, a sure sign I'm about to snap.

We get back to my house and Matt methodically places a plethora of 4-inch and 1-gallon plants around the front yard. I sit on the front porch steps eating old chocolate bars while watching Matt so content in his dreamy design world. This is his last day here. The rest of the project is mine. I think about the next few weekends and all the digging work ahead of me. For a moment I wish the old lawn were back; my therapist warned me I would second guess myself. The mounting anxiety makes me crave more Halloween chocolate. *When was Halloween?* Yikes, this candy is old.

The next day I start digging and planting. Over the course of the next few weekends I add drip emitters while pondering why laying out a drip system is never easy. It seems you always have to go back to the hardware store for one lousy piece, without which the whole project comes to a standstill. All of a sudden you're in Plumber's Hell. Just when my brain is about to detonate from thinking too much about leaky pieces of plastic, Jack comes out to the yard whining that he's bored, pleading for his Game Boy and I accidentally stab myself with a rusty garden stake.

MAY 2008

I miraculously survive the next few weekends. Upon completing the groundwork I add a blanket of mulch and beg the plants to hurry up and bloom. Then I wait for April's showers. They never come. Global warming wants to ruin my project!



Laying the groundwork for success, March '08

fence, "Yo, Diva! Where's your union card? I'm reporting you." He asks how much money the "lawn-ejection" project set me back. I preface my response by reminding him the most important part is to hire a landscape designer, someone who has an artistic vision. Once you have the drawing and plant list, you can do a lot of the digging and planting your-

Finally, I am done. As I stand on my front porch secretly admiring my work, my teamster neighbor, New York Mike, stops by to yell over the

self. A project like this could set you back anywhere from \$2,000 to \$10,000, depending on the size and style of your yard and how much physical labor you're willing to do yourself.

N.Y. Mike looks around shaking his head and says he really likes it. I tell him I'm grateful to the designer, Matt, who created a natural balance, rhythm and unity to the front yard, something that was desperately lacking before. He tells me that all these weeks he'd assumed I had designed it myself, and that if I were a true diva, I wouldn't give anyone else the credit. I would simply say thank you. "Wow Mike, you're absolutely right," I say. "It is all about *me*, isn't it? I'll never mention Matt's name again. Thanks for the advice. Did they teach you that in teamster school?"



Common native plants include, from left, *sidalcea*, *dudleya*, *leopard lily* and *salvia*.

GO NATIVE

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