

Jenny Fleming's Garden

by Luke Hass

Most friends of the Botanic Garden know by now that Jenny Fleming passed away in January 2008. Sue Rosenthal wrote a wonderful piece for the last issue of the *Manzanita* about Jenny, her garden, and her life-long dedication to native plants.



Poppies, flax, monkeyflower, and meadowfoam on the Flemings' sunny rock outcrop.

I am one of the countless people for whom seeing Jenny's garden for the first time was a revelation; I already loved native plants, but I had never seen such a beautiful, established native garden. In 2002 I had the great fortune to be hired to take care of the garden, and now as host to the various groups that visit, I get to see that same look of revelation in the eyes of the visitors.

Over the years my appreciation for the garden has only grown, and by looking at photographs of it in its earlier stages I've come to see it like a textbook on how to create a successful native plant garden. The scale and the age of Jenny's garden may make it a bit overwhelming when thinking about trying to do anything similar in your own garden. But this is in some ways the very same challenge presented by

creating naturalistic native plant gardens in general. How do you capture the expanse of a natural landscape in a small garden? Of course, not everyone can create the masterpiece that Jenny did, but there is much to be learned from her garden for just about any gardener.

Above all, Jenny's garden is a testament to the importance of maintenance in native gardens. Her goal in creating the garden was to show how beautiful native plants are; it wasn't to make something drought tolerant or low maintenance (although many parts of her garden are). I think visitors to her garden are surprised because few people have seen a native plant garden that receives the same amount of care many other beautiful non-native gardens receive.

The low maintenance/drought tolerant label that has been attached to native plants has been successful in attracting people to using natives, but it has also had some unintended consequences. One result is too many untended gardens that do little to inspire neighbors to plant natives. It has also not conveyed the full range of possibilities for different kinds of native plant gardens. And somehow, the promotion of low maintenance gardens has reinforced the idea that working in the garden is something to be avoided—even the word maintenance has a punitive ring to it. But for Jenny it wasn't "maintenance"; it was being in the garden. Her garden reminds us that gardening should be a source of pleasure, not punishment, and that it is good to get your face close to the ground and see what is going on there.

A native plant garden that requires little care or water is neither a bad thing to want nor impossible to create. But creating such a garden requires very careful planning to strike a balance between your need for color and diversity in the garden and your ability to maintain it. Generally speaking, the more color and diversity, the more maintenance will be required. It also follows that the less maintenance a garden receives, the more design becomes important to keep it visually interesting.

Jenny's garden is divided into four main zones: the lush shady area under the redwoods in the front of the house; the colorful, higher maintenance sunny rock outcropping behind the house; a small meadow next to that; and at the top of the property a wilder, drier perimeter of many locally native plants. Just in this layout of the garden are several textbook lessons on how to create a successful native garden. One, concentrate water use and maintenance in key focal areas for more color or lushness. Two, use a well-maintained foreground to improve the appearance of a wilder, less-maintained background. Three, when

planting on a hillside, put the plants with high water requirements at the bottom because the water flows down.

The different zones are planted mostly with regional plant communities, not out of ecological purism, but because the plants that grow together in the wild not only have the same requirements for sun and water, they just look good together. For Jenny it wasn't enough for a plant to be native, it had to look good. And the idea wasn't to try to "copy" nature, but to use those plant communities as a well-selected palette with which to create something beautiful.

Although the garden is given more drama by the stonework and paths, Jenny's plant combinations present natives at their best and make the garden a landmark display of California natives. Within each large zone of the garden are smaller compositions of a few key plants that give the area a distinct feel. Each of these areas would transpose well into other gardens. One lesson to be learned from the compositions Jenny created is that, in terms of garden design, it is helpful to think about small scenes. Rather than wide-open spaces that don't translate easily to a garden, think about the little nooks you come upon as you are rounding a bend of a trail, for instance.

The key to the success of these compositions in Jenny's garden are the mass plantings of one low-growing plant that frame the planting area. For this she often used small bunch grasses or low shrubs such as varieties of *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*. A few other complimentary plants add color, texture, and vertical structure. One such combination appears on the cover of the book *Wild Lilies, Irises, and Grasses*, edited by Nora Harlow and Kristin Jakob. It would be gorgeous in any sunny garden: A swath of *Festuca idahoensis* creates a foundation for purple pacific coast irises and the pink-flowering *Sidalcea malviflora*, with *Ceanothus* 'Dark Star' as a background.

Repetition, or massing, of plants is important in any garden, but in a naturalistic native garden it is even more so. For all the diversity of plants in California, often just two or three predominate in any particular natural landscape. Pockets of diversity are rare and usually balanced by an almost minimalist background. Jenny's garden captures this balance between diversity and simplicity. On a scale appropriate for the size of the garden, she used repetition and a limited planting palette to compliment the dazzling flower displays. This is what makes it not just an impressive collection of native plants, but a stunningly beautiful garden.

The age of Jenny's garden (it was started in

the 1950s) makes you think about a garden over time. This is perhaps how it is most helpful to other gardeners. Jenny didn't know what she was doing when she started out, and she certainly didn't have a master plan. She paid attention to what worked and what didn't. The garden went through different phases as the plantings matured. She didn't start with tricky plants like *Calochortus* and *Fritillaria*, she started with easy shrubs and trees. Photographs from the garden's early days show that the steep rocky bluff that is now the garden's most diverse, colorful area, filled with herbaceous perennials, annuals, and succulents, was once covered in low-growing *Ceanothus* and manzanitas. The low shrubs created a low maintenance foundation to start. As other parts of the garden became established and required less maintenance, and as her gardening ambition grew, Jenny opened up areas on the bluff for planting more colorful and higher maintenance plants. Whether Jenny planned it that way or not, starting with a foundation of low maintenance shrubs and then incorporating more demanding herbaceous perennials, annuals, and bulbs is a great way to develop a garden over time.

While clearly few gardeners will have the zeal that Jenny had, her garden is inspiration for us to continue. As Jenny found out, the more you work on your garden, the more you will be rewarded, and inspired to continue working. The more connected to your garden you become, the more you want to be in it, gardening. ♡

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Sidalcea malviflora with *Iris douglasiana* and *Festuca* 'Siskiyou Blue' on the perennial slope.