



SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

Wednesday, October 4, 2017

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Life

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Newcomer's lament

MASTER GARDENS: Santa Barbara County, Laura-Lee Parks, Lompoc : You mean I have to garden all year long without a break?

By LINDA SULLIVAN BAITY, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT
September 16, 2017 5:22 AM

Admit it — gardeners in Santa Barbara County have it pretty darn easy. We can grow almost anything year-round, without needing to worry about the right time to plant. Granted, our list of gardening tasks does shorten somewhat as the season we smugly call "winter" approaches and the rains begin. But that brief annual respite lasts only until the soil dries out enough for us to start digging in it again. (And, of course, there are many who never really stop!)

Now think for a moment about the legions of home gardeners who move to the balmy California coast from more severe climates. The sudden and drastic changes they experience in gardening demands can be both exhilarating and daunting. Laura-Lee Parks, 63, remembers being delighted with the native oak trees that shaded her new Mesa Oaks neighborhood when she and her husband, Glen, 69, moved to the outskirts of Lompoc in 1998.

Then her new reality set in.

"I lived in Big Bear for 17 years, where the gardening season runs from Memorial Day to Labor Day," Mrs. Parks recalls somewhat wistfully. "It was perfectly suited to my life as a high school English teacher because I had the summers off and could spend all day long working in my yard. But, frankly, I always looked forward to school starting each fall because that meant no more gardening chores for the next nine months. It didn't take me long after moving here to realize that Glen and I would now need to be out working in our garden all year long without a break!"

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After moving from Big Bear to Lompoc, Laura-Lee Parks discovered gardening was a year-round proposition. Her backyard features flowers, feeders and fountains.

LINDA SULLIVAN BAITY PHOTOS

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The Parks' cozy suburban home, which rests on one-third of an acre not far from La Purisima Mission ("I'm a Victorian girl in a Mediterranean house"), was brand-new and surrounded by sand in every direction — an abrupt departure from the rock-hard soils in Big Bear Valley that Mrs. Parks insists can only be penetrated by a pickax. The solitary trace of greenery on their property was a majestic, multi-trunked coast live oak that remains the dramatic focal point of their front yard.

The couple worked with a professional designer to create a basic garden layout, and because both were still working full-time, they took many months deciding exactly what to plant. Mrs. Parks pored over "Sunset" books, sought inspiration from her neighbors' landscapes, and frequented local nurseries to familiarize herself with the vast array of vegetation she would now be able to grow year-round. Her final plant list features lots of specimens unfamiliar to her, as well as some old favorites and even a few "volunteer" surprises.

The Parks' front yard is anchored by the gigantic sprawling oak, whose sensitive roots and deep shade put strict limits on what can survive beneath it. Mrs. Parks sensibly scattered a thick layer of bark mulch under the tree's dense canopy, accented only by a swath of blue and white agapanthus. A smallish patch of grass thrives in full sun, and the remainder of the landscape is devoted to her husband's rose collection. Mr. Parks grew up watching his mother tend her own beloved rose bushes and now he proudly carries on the family tradition. His 'Cécile Brünner' climbers ramble atop the split rail boundary fence, and standard rose bushes of every shape and shade fill the large, sunny bed leading to the front door — 'Pink Peace,' 'Mr. Lincoln' and 'Inkspot' being but three of the many eye-catching varieties on display.

Mrs. Parks loves sitting out under the oak tree admiring her husband's horticultural handiwork, but most of her outdoor time is spent out back, where the entire yard is one big flower garden. A narrow strip of bright green turf is the only place where she hasn't planted something blooming and beautiful. She averages at least an hour a day in her garden. "I hand water everything once a week," she explains, "and we don't have sprinklers or a drip system, just good old hoses. Glen waters his roses and I do everything else. It's my therapy!"

She likes to take monthly photos to document seasonal changes in the garden and to help her remember which plants flourished and which didn't do so well. Another secret to her success is that she loves to experiment; she's not afraid to make mistakes or move plants around until she knows "they're happy." Without question, one of the happiest plants in her yard is the stunning hydrangea that stands more than 5 feet tall and at its peak is covered in massive pink pom-poms. Because she'd never had much luck with them before, Mrs. Parks knew she was taking a big risk when she stuck a small



At top, Laura-Lee Parks, Lompoc.

potted hydrangea from Trader Joe's into the ground a few years ago. "I'm still amazed by its size," she admits. "We're both very happy!"

The Parks' backyard is alive with vibrant colors, shapes and sounds. Variety is the theme, featuring reliable perennials such as lantana, verbena, delphinium and rudbeckia alongside old-fashioned favorites like camellia, jasmine and hollyhocks. Sunloving salvias and lavenders from the Mediterranean mix with California native Matilija poppies and tropical violet tubeflowers. Containers of annual petunias and impatiens mingle on the shady covered porch. Coneflowers, agastache, abutilon and buddleia bushes attract a continuous parade of bees and butterflies, while song birds are drawn in by the feeders and solar-powered fountains.

So how did Mrs. Parks go from knowing nothing about how we garden here in Santa Barbara County to creating her own charming little corner of paradise? She put in lots of long hours, lots of hard work, and learned as much as she could through trial-and-error before she heard about the UC Master Gardener program.

"I saw an article in the newspaper announcing that a new training session was about to begin and I got so excited because it sounded like exactly what I was looking for. But I wasn't ready to make the commitment, so I saved the article and waited until the right time."

As soon as Mrs. Parks retired as director of curriculum and principal at Vandenberg Middle School, her first priority was to become a Master Gardener. It's a decision that not only increased her gardening prowess but also gave her a new job.

"I've learned so much valuable and scientifically valid information, in addition to the joy of developing new friendships with like-minded gardeners. Since I've spent my whole life as an educator, it seemed like a perfect fit for me to take on a volunteer leadership role as chair of the Training Committee. Now I'm happy to be back working with students again and looking forward to how much they'll teach me."

Mrs. Parks is an excellent example of someone who never stops growing — much like her happy plants. She's learned her gardening lessons well and now has a cheerful, charming, climateappropriate landscape to enjoy all year long, and without a pickax in sight.

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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.

Middle photo, bees can't stay away from the cone-flowers.

Bottom, orange abutilon, blue delphinium and pink lisianthus make a colorful combo.



In order from top to bottom, roses are a Parks family tradition. 'Pink Peace' is a favorite variety.

Center, hardy lantanas stay green and flower year-round.

Bottom, a painted lady butterfly meets 'Flaming Katy' kalanchoe.



An immense oak tree anchors the front yard.