

# Evolution in the garden / Survival of the fittest not a bad strategy, says landscape designer

[sfchronicle.com/homeandgarden/article/Evolution-in-the-garden-Survival-of-the-fittest-2659141.php](http://sfchronicle.com/homeandgarden/article/Evolution-in-the-garden-Survival-of-the-fittest-2659141.php)

March 29, 2003



Whether you're revitalizing a border or working with a whole new yard, garden planning can be intimidating. It's not easy to imagine the majestic flowering beauty poised to emerge from a scrubby shrub in a gallon container. The simple solution, says horticulturist Roger Raiche, is to let nature take its course.

The key is to let natural selection play its role in finding vegetation that will thrive. Start planting, see what looks good, watch what withers.

"I think of a dead plant as a new opportunity," Raiche says. "Design isn't a one-shot deal."

Raiche and David McCrory, partners in the landscape design firm Planet Horticulture, see garden design as a three- to five-year process. But that doesn't mean you have to wait five years to enjoy a beautiful yard. A case in point is the garden at Raiche's former Berkeley home.

For 12 years, Raiche lived and gardened in Maybeck Cottage, the former home of Bernard Maybeck, Berkeley's iconic architect. When Raiche arrived in 1988, the lot was a typical rental yard: a patch of grass, an elm tree, ivy growing along a wooden fence with a hilly area given over to brush.

Raiche, an internationally recognized expert on California native plants and, until he retired in February, the horticulturist in charge of the UC Berkeley Botanical Garden's California area, got busy. When he and McCrory moved out last summer, the yard had become an intriguing series of outdoor rooms that looked as if they'd been growing for decades.

Following the Maybeck Cottage garden's evolution is a good way to learn how to design over time and work with the natural rhythms of plants.

Raiche's first goal was to turn the shabby border in the front yard into what he calls "the California version of an English perennial border." After focusing on native plants at the Botanical Garden all day, he didn't want to limit himself to California natives at home.

Raiche certainly has his own style. "I like to use plants to give a casual, layered effect," he says. Raiche tore out the ivy along the fence and planted majestic grasses, ferns and New Zealand flax, which he loves for its bold spiky leaves. In just three years, the border had become what he describes as "a wave of vegetation ready to engulf the lawn."

Until 1998, when Raiche and McCrory bought the house and property, Raiche wasn't allowed to remove the lawn or patio. To break up the patio visually, he began adding containers of all kinds, from small gallon bowls and pots to a 9-foot-high Spanish olive oil urn. One massive pot might contain a single towering specimen, while others were heavily planted with a mix of trailing and shooting varieties.

As the garden filled in, Raiche began adding art instead of plants. Two Berkeley sculptors, Marcia Donahue and Mark Bulwinkle, contributed whimsical elements, including a granite snowman sculpted by Donahue with iron "twig" arms crafted by Bulwinkle.

The final phase saw the inclusion of architectural elements. After Raiche and McCrory bought the quarter-acre property, they went to town, digging out the hated lawn and adding broken-concrete patios, two seating areas, a pool and two fountains. The goal, says McCrory, was "to make a small yard feel more complex and have different places to visit, rather than it being all laid out in front of you."

Adds Raiche, "I want a garden you can visit over and over and always find new things to look at or a new way of seeing it."

---

### Getting started

One way to begin planning your garden is to identify the microclimates on your site. Find a plant that's doing well and then look for companions from plants that typically grow in community with it.

The UC Berkeley Botanical Garden is famous for its large number of rare and endangered species - several of which were discovered by Raiche - and features one of the most diverse plant collections in the United States. Arranged by region, it's a good spot to see specimens of

the plants in the Maybeck Cottage garden, such as torch lily (*Kniphofia northiae*), Chilean bellflower (*Lapageria rosea*) and apostle plant (*Neomarica caerulea*).

If you want to purchase these and other unusual and interesting plants, don't miss the Spring Plant Sale from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. April 26, with a members-only preview sale from 5 to 7:30 p.m. April 25. Admission to the sale is free. Also available at the sale will be a selection of unusual houseplants and carnivorous plants.

UC Botanical Garden, 200 Centennial Drive in Berkeley, is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily until Memorial Day. From then through Labor Day, hours will be 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday and Tuesday and 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday. The garden is closed the first Tuesday of every month and on major holidays.

For information call (510) 643-2755, or (510) 642-3352 for school or group tours. Admission is \$3 for adults, \$2 for seniors, \$1 for children 3 to 18; admission is free to all on Thursdays.

To reach Planet Horticulture, call Roger Raiche or David McCrory at (800) 572-7922 or log onto [www.planethorticulture.com](http://www.planethorticulture.com) or [www.goldleafvineyards.com](http://www.goldleafvineyards.com).

- S.K.

---

Garden art and architecture

Roger Raiche and David McCrory like to tuck small pieces of sculpture - or interesting objects - in among plantings.

Place art in beds or create a bed at the foot of a sculpture to make it look integral to the garden rather than plopped down.

To pair art with foliage, Raiche suggests picking up on an aspect of the artwork. For example, match - or contrast with - one of its colors, or choose plants with leaves that echo its form.

Take a cue from Marcel Duchamp and his urinal "Fountain" and decide that art is what you say it is. In the Maybeck garden, rusty shovels and coat hangers share the space with Donahue's and Bulwinkle's art. Grow morning glories on a bedspring trellis; use broken china to outline a flower bed. Be aware that art or architectural elements will be at least partly covered as plants fill in, so choose ones that are bold.

- S.K.

---

The ins and outs of urns

Containers add interest and create flexibility.

-- If you can't draw or visualize from sketches, keep moving the containers around until you get a composition you like.

-- If you're gardening in a new space, starting a precious specimen in a container preserves it from being planted where it won't thrive. If it ends up in a space without enough sun, just move it.

-- Arrange three rows of containers in descending sizes to transform a concrete strip into a flowering bank.

-- For areas of dirt that you can't or don't want to dig out, Raiche and McCrory suggest a bottomless container such as a large terra cotta pipe or a ceramic planter with the bottom cut out. Eventually, the plant's roots grow out of the bottom of the container and into the earth.

-- Make sure to water plants in containers thoroughly and feed them regularly - every three weeks during the growing season.

- S.K.