

## A garden retrospective

We have lived here for fourteen years and the garden has taught me much. I am glad that I started slowly. Many of the original plants are gone. Some did not meet my aesthetic requirements, others were not well-matched to the site, a few grew out of control, spreading where they were not wanted, and some just died for whatever reason.



Sidewalk garden photographed on a very hot summer day (today!) in mid-day. This garden has been watered only once this summer.

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Three oaks were planted  
in the parkway in 2005.

All of the original deer grass plants, however, remain, and their repeating pattern provides order to the wild parkway garden. I continue to plant this large bunch grass throughout the yard as a unifying element. They meander through the parkway, provide a transition from the small bits of lawn to the drier garden beds in the backyard, and wrap around from the sidewalk garden to the front yard. While other plants are disappearing from my garden, these are increasing in number.

The parkway oaks are six and a half years old, and though still rather bushy in their juvenile form, they are beginning to acquire a tree-like structure, reaching fifteen to twenty feet in height. Each summer I remove low branches that obscure the sidewalk and street, further exposing the main trunk.

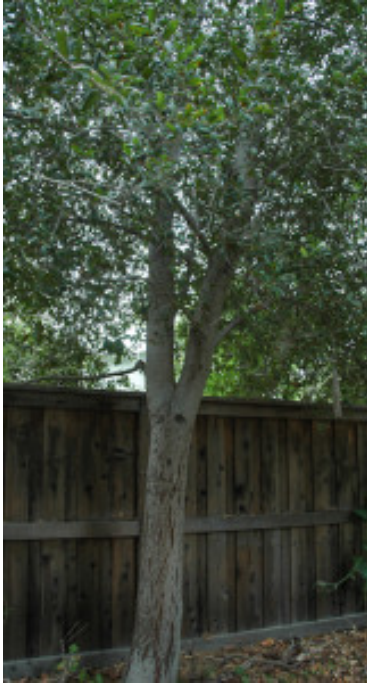


This photo, pointed up into mature coast live oak, does not do this tree justice. It is so hard to capture the majesty of these living things.

In addition to these garden newcomers, the largest and most majestic oak in the yard is thriving. Surrounded by lawn when we moved in, it is now blanketed with its own oak leaf mulch. This sixty-plus year old tree grew from an acorn when the previous owner of our house was a girl. It defines the backyard, providing welcome dappled-shade and habitat for innumerable birds and critters, as well as for people. Each and every day I enjoy this tree and send silent thanks to the family that allowed it to remain.



There are two other young oaks, also volunteers – meaning that they volunteered to grow in the garden, rather than having been intentionally selected and planted by a hapless gardener. One, growing near an old avocado, is a gangly adolescent. When the avocado reaches senescence the oak will be ready to take its place, providing more food for birds than people, but keeping the yard cool and comfortable for all.



Oak, with co-dominant  
branching, grew from an acorn.  
There are other problematic  
branches further up in the tree.

The sixth oak on the property began its life on the east side of the backyard struggling toward the sunlight through a thicket of nasty English ivy. The seedling took off when the ivy was removed. It is not in the best place but I did not have the heart to remove it. Now it is about thirty feet tall with a trunk diameter of about seven inches. Unfortunately the form of the tree is also not ideal. Although its upright habit is beautiful to look at, its branches tend to have very narrow crotches. This is not a problem now but as the tree grows the limbs will interfere with each other. Crowded crotches weaken and may eventually split apart. I removed one large lower branch and it healed over beautifully. The main trunk splits again into two co-dominant branches about five feet up. I wish I had dealt with this problem earlier when it would have been a simple matter to remove one of the branches. Now I will have to employ an arborist to make the cut, and it is likely that there will be other branches even further up the tree that will need to be removed. In any event, the tree is beautiful and I hope that future residents of this house will thank me for leaving it.

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Low-growing large  
branch was removed  
and has healed over.

Together these six oaks and the many deer grass plants are signature plants that define this oak woodland garden.

Amidst the oaks and grasses are coastal sage scrub shrubs. As the oaks spread many of these will decline due to inadequate sunlight.

Some are even now getting too old and no longer perform especially well. It is a hard thing to do, but it is alright to remove garden plants that are not serving a purpose or have become aesthetically unpleasing.



I am going to remove Frosty Blue ceanothus, center of picture.  
This will expose the oak (left of it in picture). Nearby I planted  
a smaller ceanothus (Wheeler Canyon).

A Frosty Blue California lilac (Ceanothus 'Frosty Blue') planted in the sidewalk garden twelve

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years ago grew to nearly its predicted size of twelve feet in height and width, though annual pruning keeps it contained within the six foot wide parkway. In recent years its bloom has been less showy than when it was younger. It is time for it to go. Last year I planted a smaller California lilac, Wheeler Canyon, near it so that the beautiful blue flowers, so appealing to pollinators and people, would ornament the parkway in future years.

Although I sow wildflower seeds every year, recent springtime floral displays do not compare with earlier years. In open space, annual wildflower displays vary year to year depending on the amount and distribution of rainfall. The best wildflower shows, though, often follow fires and other disturbances. Removing the lawn created a condition of great disturbance, perfect for wildflowers. As my garden matures and settles in, the wildflowers diminish, just as they do in nature. With the development of good habitat comes more insects and birds, who in turn feed off more of the seeds and seedlings. In addition, larger perennials shade the soil in much of the parkway, reducing available space and sunlight needed for wildflowers. Still, I sow seeds each year and pockets of poppies, gillias and phacelias appear.



Front of house in 1999 had lawn covering the entire garden up to all paths and walks. *Rhaphiolepis* was growing (and dying) in the foundation bed beneath the window.



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Front yard lawn on the west side is totally gone (not visible in this picture), while the edges have been eaten away on the east side. The foundation bed beneath the window has hedge planting of Eve Case coffee berry (*Rhamnus californica* 'Eve Case'). The corner of lawn has iris, wiregrass, coral bells, seaside strawberry, gray fescue and other natives.

Fourteen years ago this one-third of an acre suburban lot contained five mature trees growing in a sea of green grass with a frilly edge of impatiens. Gradually year by year the grass has receded, being replaced with native plants, bunch grasses, oak trees, and just plain oak leaf mulch. It is browner, but quieter, as the sound of birds singing replaces lawn mowers and blowers. If one takes the time to slow down and look, the yard at any time of day or night is full of life; lizards slither through the leaves, spiders weave their webs, birds catch insects in mid-air, and large iridescent green beetles soar unbelievably high in their ungraceful armored shells.