

# 'Tis the season to landscape

Last fall I searched all over for help in rehabilitating my garden. Some landscapers wouldn't come for a free estimate. Another came, but declined to bid after spotting poison oak in our canyon. He should be in a different line of work.



**KAREN TELLEEN-LAWTON**

Mexi-Spanish, and my own Spanglish.

As a Botanic Garden docent, I had pretty firm ideas about what I wanted: natives except where no native fit my other criteria. Our ideas jelled as the demolition progressed, and we designed my little Garden of Eden: California natives supplemented with citrus, avocado, and stone fruits. Oak trees limbed up, out of reach of the inevitable brush fire. When the fire comes, we hope ours is a house that firefighters examine and say, "These people have done their part to give us a chance at success. Let's save it!"

Picking the plants was easier than actually obtaining them. Nursery growers seem to be the last to know that NOW is the right planting season. We're on the 3% patch of earth blessed with a Mediterranean climate: cool wet winters and hot dry summers. Landscapes planted now can drink for free while preparing for the extended dry season. Despite this, many of our choices were unavailable. I started getting phone calls.

"Kaa-ren," said a deep, sensuous voice. I thought it might be a prank caller, but I hung on long enough to realize it was Alejandra. "Kaa-ren, do you like Madrone trees?"

"Yes, I love their maroon bark."

"Because I'm having a hard time finding Ironwoods big enough. I can

Eventually I used the Green Gardener list to pick Alejandra Aleman, owner of Rincon Landscapes. She and her husband Nicholas Lebrero are Argentinians whose accents are so strong that it was like five languages being spoken in our yard: English, Argen-English, Argen-Spanish,

get some small ones but they'll take a while to get tall."

"Let's do both," I say. "They'll look nice together. Madrones in the front and Ironwoods behind, when you can get them."

Another time she called to confirm she'd just listed our surplus succulents, Agave attenuates, on Craig's List. "Did you see today's L.A. Times?" I asked her. "There's an article about houses that survived the San Diego fires, all of which used succulents to create fire barriers. So let's keep them all."

She immediately removed the Craig's List ad; they'd been there for less than ten minutes. We continued talking, adjusting the plan to replace Mountain Mahogany, Island Cherry, and Barberry with fireproof Opuntia on the steep west-side slope. Then I walked out front, phone in hand, where an old Ford van had pulled up next to our driveway. A man and a little boy wearing garden gloves were hauling agaves into the van. Wow, Craig's List is miraculous! I let them keep what they'd already hauled.

I gave up our enormous twin blue agaves in the back yard - their size threatened us in the kitchen. My son was aghast when he saw them gone. "Those were the most beautiful plants in the yard," he lamented. But it was hard to keep up with their sharp-fingered offspring: they reproduced like boar-sized rabbits.

We settled for several blue agave babies as anchors by the driveway, where there was more room. Alejandra wasn't happy with mixing blue agaves with manzanita, but had to compromise. "There are blue-hued manzanitas," I mollified her. "We've got the purple sage, with its blue-gray leaves. It'll look fabulous!"

On Thanksgiving Day I encountered someone very thankful for the changes. Gophers had been rototilled out of their cubbies, and as I went to check on the

progress I walked within a foot of a gopher snake. Ze (this is the modern replacement for he/she) sported a mid-section with a gopher-sized lump. Ze looked like the rest of us would look in a few hours - too full to move. All but the gophers were most thankful that ze showed up for a meal every few days after that.

It did seem to take forever to get through the demolition, hardscape, and irrigation phases. But one day it came true - the movie-set transformation that Alejandra promised. We arrived home at midnight after a week away; the yard smelled like a herd of Herefords had been grazing. Ahh, the fresh smell of "black bark", a nutrient-rich mulch. The next morning we awakened to a gloriously complete landscape, Agave attenuates dramatic and lovely against our salmon-colored stucco, trees ringed in little stone curbs, and baby plants banked with compost.

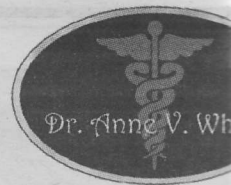
For the next few mornings I felt a little wistful. Alejandra, Nicholas, Cesar, and Moi had been part of my life for weeks. Daily, they found me at my computer when they arrived, witnessed my breakfast routine, saw me ride off on my bike for exercise or errands. They watched me depart for holiday parties and one funeral. Now I was left alone with no one to witness my daytime life. I was relieved and a little bit lonely, surrounded by a beautiful, nearly weedless garden.

You know the rest of the story: the rain came right on schedule.

*Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of people, nature, events, and observations transporting the reader around the world and back to Santa Barbara. Her writing can be found at [www.CanyonVoices.com](http://www.CanyonVoices.com), including excerpts from her book, Canyon Voices - the Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon.*

## AT A GLANCE

The Green Gardener Program for Santa Barbara County educates local gardeners in resource-efficient and pollution-prevention landscape maintenance practices. It is a regional program designed to offer education, training, and promotion of participating gardeners and landscape maintenance contractors. Phone: 805-564-5460. Website: <http://www.greengardener.org/index.htm>.



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