

Fred and Mary Jane Adair have sculpted a mature garden that shows years of care and the wisdom gleaned from observation. Through planning and then accepting what naturally thrives, they have nurtured a healthy and robust garden. Volunteer plants are not denied a place in the sun. “Feverfew, poppies, and forget-me-nots all grow without any struggle,” Mary Jane observes. “It seems the ones you deliberately plant are the most trouble, and the ones that appear from the bird’s beak are the easiest.”

Acknowledging their role, as you enter the garden birds usher you down through the tall trees and native plants to the house wrapped cozily in a huge clematis vine – a popular nesting site with birds. This year alone the Adairs found two nests in it. They also found an unusual bag-shaped bushtit “condo” that most likely fell out of a madrone.

Winding paths move you through a variety of tall shrubs that are interesting year round, whether for their bark (as the red-twig dogwood), berries (viburnums and snowberries), flowers (hydrangeas), or foliage (paperbark maple).

Around the shady south side of the house are eight-foot tall, happy, hardy fuschias that bloom in profusion, as well as three Pawpaw trees that remind Mary Jane of her childhood in Indiana.

The Adairs selected a honey locust tree to provide filtered shade for their deck, while not blocking the beautiful view. Mary Jane notes “an added bonus is that it drops all its tiny leaves within two days, so clean up is efficient” (unlike the madrones, which sprinkle difficult-to-rake leaves throughout the year).

The Adairs’ big project has been to methodically replace invasive English ivy and St. John’s Wort that used to blanket the shoreside slope. Fred digs and pulls it out thoroughly, and then they plant native shrubs and groundcovers. The Pesticide-Free Neighborhood Project was the Adairs’ impetus to get serious about the ivy. They started on it two years ago, and figure it will take at least another two growing seasons to completely finish the job.

How many hours per week do you spend in the garden during the growing season? We spend 25-35 hours between the two of us. There’s a lot of pruning, and the ivy project takes many hours. We did reduce the lawn to a tiny patch of grass under the deck. We may look into replacing some of the more demanding plants with varieties that require less pruning.

How do you control pests? Where aphids are a problem, we hose them off once a week. On roses, I roll or pinch them; the live ones do not seem to like being around their dead brethren. Slugs we collect and dispose, “dice” with a weeder or trowel, or control with Sluggo. Before we participated in the Pesticide-Free Neighborhood Project, we occasionally used a stronger slug killer but have since switched. I like the idea of not adding chemicals to the beach.

How do you fertilize? We have used compost for many years, created in green cones and bins. I also use alfalfa pellets around the roses. Watch out with alfalfa meal, though – it seemed to be really bad for a potted rose. For flowering plants in pots, I use a slow-release fertilizer; since the plants are in pots there is added security that the fertilizer remains with the plant and does not wash off into the bay.

How do you keep water use efficient? When it’s as hot and dry as it has been this summer, we water once every five days. We use drippers and soakers, but I like the soakers better – the drippers tend to clog. New plants get hand watered for their first year. We have four rain barrels, but we used them up early this year.

How do you handle plant diseases? We try to watch for them and get rid of them before they cause too much trouble. If it’s really bad we just throw the plant away (in the garbage, not in the compost). Also, I wash my tools with hot, soapy water any time I work on a plant with disease. As a precaution, once a week I wash my cutters, clippers, and trowels.

What about weeds – what is your approach? Pull and pull and pull! There are two or three that persist, and luckily they are easy to pull out. We also use the weed torch for sidewalks.

Do you try to welcome beneficial wildlife to your garden? Yes, birds and butterflies. We provide birdhouses (two got used this year), and a birdbath. To keep mosquitoes from breeding in it we use a cake made of *Bacillus thuringiensis*. Just place a small chunk of it in the water. It’s nontoxic.

Parting tips: Mary Jane says the main way to keep a garden looking nice is to dead head as much as possible. And when it comes to selecting raspberry varieties, the key is to have good friends: Each of the three delicious raspberry varieties they grow was given to them by a different friend, each of whom happened to be named George.

Interview by Rachel Donnette