

The SCHS was fortunate to welcome Mike Evans, the founder and president of Tree of Life Nursery in San Juan Capistrano, as our March speaker. He presented us with beautiful and practical options for replacing our tired lawns with sustainable planting alternatives, as suggested by the program's title "Ugly Is Not A Turf Replacement." It is his belief that a well-designed California natural garden will always pass the test of time, and can continually provide valuable habitat for birds, beneficial pollinators, and other friendly wildlife species.

Tree of Life Nursery has been producing and selling California native plants for over 40 years, and Mike has experience in native plant production, design, landscaping and ecological restoration. He promotes a style of authentic horticulture - specifically the concept of appropriate landscaping with native California plants. In his presentation Mike provided numerous



Photo courtesy of speaker.

examples of good, and also not so good, landscaping choices people have made in their attempts to plant more water-wise gardens. He then offered some basic guidelines to keep in mind so as not to become overwhelmed by over-thinking garden project parameters.

Mike urged us to "tell a story and create a narrative" with our gardens, as well as making them functional, providing opportunities for reciprocal relationships between the gardener and other life forms, and trying to emulate nature as much as possible. The latter is the ultimate goal, and to achieve it, Mike encourages people to get out into nature as often as possible to be

better able to interpret it in their own landscape designs. One way of doing this is to incorporate more California native plants in our garden spaces.

Issues related to landscape water conservation are not new to California, and native plants have always been a part of the solution. Mike advocates for a present-day California that deserves to look like the true California. He believes that replacing useless turf in our landscapes provides a perfect opportunity to plant a real garden, one which will invite us to slow down and make the space experiential, not just visually appealing. He remarked that "nature is complex, but never complicated" and by using native plants, we create garden environments that appear effortless while still supporting a myriad of native wildlife.

Adhering to a "less is more" philosophy, Mike also stressed that accent plants, like succulents, are more effective if they have something to accent. By using them to help tell a larger story, they will be more effective than just throwing them together as a large collection. Details make a garden special, and in a California native garden, many opportunities for varied story-telling abound. Our native plants are among the showiest and most unique in the world, as well as being ecologically friendly, low maintenance and having low water needs. In addition to making sensible plant selections, Mike pleaded for a naturalistic approach to maintenance, one by which plants can grow into the forms and sizes they are meant to be, thereby better representing a true "California style."

Mike showed many slides of gardens that were formal and structured while still being simple (e.g. , Japanese style)

as well as others that were awkwardly designed, or utilized plants purely for aesthetic effect, or provided no places for people to experience the garden. He also shared pictures of irrigation dos and don'ts, and referred the audience to the Tree of Life website (see below) where tips on "Watering Native Plants" can be found.

Ultimately, Mike would like to see a new baseline for people's expectations of what newly planted landscapes should look like - one that encourages them to use all their senses, plus their imaginations. It is his belief that gardens



Photo credit: Sabine Steinmetz

modeled after nature tell a very consistent and unified message, as well as inviting people to come in and stay awhile - throughout every season.

Once homeowners consistently see new designs that are naturalistic and properly impemented, they will begin asking for them in the future.

To wrap up his presentation, Mike shared a quote from Frederick Law Olmsted that states "It is a scientific fact that the occasional contemplation of natural scenes of an impressive character, particularly if this contemplation occurs in connection with relief from ordinary cares, change of air and change of habits, is favorable to the health and vigor of men and especially to the health and vigor of their intellect." With this quote, as well as considered answers Mike provided to audience questions, we were left with much inspiration and food for thought - and a hunger for more.

SHARING SECRETS

Our weather-inspired question for March was:

Which of your plants enjoyed our wet winter and are performing the best for you?



I love my native redbud tree, *Cercis occidentalis*, with its cute little pink flowers, and my red *Sparaxis*, a south African bulb, which comes back every year. My *Cassia artemisioides* is covered in bright yellow flowers and my *Pelargonium 'Shottisham's Pet'* just burst into bloom - spring is in full swing in my happy garden!

- Aprille Curtis

All of my salvias have been showing off, including *S. greggii 'Alba'*, *S. chamaedryoides*, and *S. flocculosa* (which has been blooming since January). After several dormant springs, a few surprises that came up this year were a batch of *Freesia*, scattered *Claytonia*, and some *Nepeta racemosa* (Catmint), which, of course, the cats discovered before I did.

- Sabine Steinmetz