

Area nursery keeps pace with trend

Abbie Blair: Native Plants

The urban market for native plants is poised to explode.

"People are hungry for information about natives," said Arvind Kumar, member of the steering committee of Going Native Garden Tour, one of several tours which has been developed to show how to use natives in the home garden.

In fact, so many gardeners are using native plants that Elkhorn Nursery, one of the first nurseries to propagate natives, has expanded into a retail outlet in Soquel.

Designer Alrie Middlebrook welcomes the idea of a Mid-County native-plant outlet. The growing interest has meant that for the past three years, Middlebrook Gardens in San Jose has focused exclusively on native designs.

Today, "100 percent of our designs have the native component. The demand is strong enough to support a business," Middlebrook said.

Landscape architect Joni Janecki, of Joni L. Janecki and Associates Inc. in Santa Cruz, has watched the use of native plants increase over the years, and has included them in her designs.

"There has been a large shift to including ... natives into the parks and open spaces," Janecki noted.

The best of both worlds

Elkhorn Nursery owner Robert Stephens and manager Nicky Hughes said the Soquel site, a nursery since the '50s, is closer to the urban market than the original Moss Landing nursery, and the two sites complement each other.

The staff at Elkhorn is concentrating on expanding the range of plants sought by the urban market, and production will be split between the two locations.

Propagation and contract growing will stay at cool, windy Moss Landing along with the production of grasses and coastal plants that grow well there, said Hughes. Seed production and taller plants will flourish in warm, sheltered Main Street site in Soquel, she said.

"I will be able to grow trees now. Anything that grows taller than two feet gets flattened in Moss Landing," she said.

Production will focus first on plants from the Soquel Creek watershed, including trees such as oaks, dogwoods, Western sycamores and box elders.

#### Natural history

The management at Elkhorn has watched the demand for native plants change. The nursery began in response to a request in the early 1990s to make native grass seed commercially available.

The first seeds sown at Moss Landing were earmarked for an in-house restoration project to restore the Elkhorn Ranch coastal terrace in the late 1980s, shortly after the property was purchased by David Packard, co-founder of Hewlett Packard.

News of the project spread, and requests were made to buy the seed. Packard responded by investing in state-of-the-art seed cleaning equipment and offering the seed commercially.

By the early 1990s, restoration and revegetation projects needed container plants. Two small hoopouses were built at Elkhorn Ranch, and commercial production began.

In the early 1990s, "native plant material was hard to find. The Packards were a resource. They were the first ones in the area producing local grasses in large quantities," recalls Janecki.

By the late 1990s, the nursery was growing, installing and designing native landscapes. In essence, it had become a full-service nursery.

In 1996 after Packard's death, ownership of the nursery passed to son-in-law Stephens. Nursery staff began working on large-scale revegetation and restoration projects like the one at the Seymour Center and for the Center for Ocean Health.

Janecki designed the landscaping. Elkhorn staff produced the plants, and put the design to work, collecting and propagating the initial seeds, planting and finally maintaining the area.

The project involved producing 20 species, totaling well over 10,000 plants.

"It was not an easy conversion. There were over two

acres of berms restored to coastal prairie and grassland. A lot of weeding was necessary, natural herbicides were developed and a lot of docent power was utilized," Janecki recalled.

#### Native plants as business

Today, the staff is sticking closer to home and working to develop "co-opetition," a term coined at the nursery several years ago. 'Co-opetition' in essence means companies that share a common goal help each other, although they compete in the same market.

"We develop partnerships with local professionals in the industry that share our approach to sustainable gardening," explained Hughes. "It creates a successful symbiotic relationship."

Using these relationships, they can concentrate on their core business of "plant production, which is what we really do best," Hughes said. "According to our market surveys, over 90 percent of our business is repeat."

Middlebrook has been coming back for more than four years. The plants from Elkhorn "go into the ground well, they are not over-fertilized, so the loss rate is very low," Middlebrook said.

The Soquel nursery is still in its early years, and this is a great time to stop by and get to know the people there.

Your time will be well spent. The demonstration garden is in full bloom and there is a wide variety of plants of various sizes to choose from.

Tap into the nursery's new information sheets created by Hughes called "Be ImagiNATIVE." Each one focuses on a different topic of gardening, such as "Create a Hummingbird Garden with Natives." They are packed with useful information to get you even more fascinated about natives.

"Come grow with us," offers Hughes.

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