

LAWN & LANDSCAPE INDUSTRY

Natural habitat gardens sell when explained in detail

by James E. Guyette
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■ Landscape managers say more customers are appreciating the benefits of natural habitat gardens, which essentially use the plants and animals originally found at a site.

The key factors for this type of work are specialized plant selection skills, education of both landscape manager and customer, and a firm commitment to integrated pest management techniques.

"It's a business opportunity that's just beginning—and it's growing," reports Dr. Fernando Agudelo-Silva of FAS Technologies in Berkeley, Calif. An entomologist, Agudelo-Silva specializes in using beneficial insects for interior and exterior pest control. Much of his work deals with implementing pesticide-free landscape applications in cooperation with landscape managers who tend natural habitat areas.

"The thrust of my practice is planning," says Agudelo-Silva. "A lot of the pest problems in gardens can be eliminated by planning before you have the outbreak of pests."

Agudelo-Silva says his customers usually have to be receptive to at least the natural habitat concept from the beginning. "The clients have to have the attitude that they want to reduce pesticide use long-term," he explains. "My approach includes a significant amount of education. In the beginning, it's a lot of work to make the client feel comfortable—most people don't feel comfortable with insects."

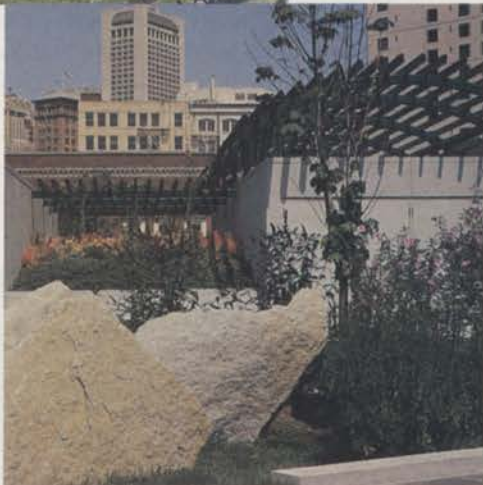
Photographs and charts are critical sales tools. "I use a lot of visual aids. I have pictures of beneficial insects, before-and-after pictures (of landscape sites) and charts. A lot of people, for example, have



never seen a picture of a beneficial mite attacking a harmful mite."

Clients mostly come to Agudelo-Silva via word-of-mouth or other referrals. "There are situations where a client can't use chemicals, like a hospital, for example," he notes.

The right 'diagnosis'—Natural habitat gardens can be just the right cure for hospital grounds in need of landscape improvements. "Hospitals seem to like the idea," reports Linda J. Novy, chief executive officer at Gardener's Guild, Inc., a full-service landscape firm based in San Rafael,



Calif. "They want to create a healing, healthy environment around them."

Novy notes that the natural habitat concept is especially appealing to her homeowner association clients, retirement communities and senior citizen-oriented institutions.

Dial it in—A landscape manager skilled at this type of project is able to assign differing levels of naturalness based on the clients' needs. It depends a lot on the site itself, too. "In a suburban or rural type of environment, it can be expanded," Novy explains. "You can have more than plants and beneficial insects—

you can bring reptiles into the picture."

Reptiles and amphibians such as snakes, lizards, toads, salamanders and frogs are great pest controllers. The menagerie of desired animals is dictated by site concerns.

Gardener's Guild created the butterfly garden at San Francisco's Yerba Buena Gardens. There,

butterflies seek tall trees for roosting, and—for some species—developing into their pupa form. They also seek open sunny areas. Certain flowers, grasses and shrubs are used to provide nectar for the adults and food for the caterpillars.

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Sense of history helps

■ Look to the past when selecting natural habitat plant materials, advises Ken Druse, author of the book "The Natural Habitat Garden."

"In evaluating your site, take into consideration what would have been there and nearby presettlements working from researched models (in regional and local guides, old topographical maps, museums and arboretums, for example)—before the bulldozers pulled up and put in a parking lot—not just what exists today," the book says.

More suggestions:

• **Educate, educate, educate.** "It's a learning curve for the clients in having them accept a look that they may not be used to," explains Lance Schendorf, general manager at Gachina Landscape Management, Menlo Park, Calif.

Corporate office complexes, homeowner associations and other developments may opt for a natural habitat garden in order to attract certain wildlife species or to comply with regulations for preserving native plantlife. This approach can also be a plus when it comes to projecting a politically correct image to the public.

"People are becoming more environmentally aware in regard to their landscapes," notes Schendorf. "The corporate client will get into it as something that's good to do from a public rela-

tions view—it'll look good in the company newsletter."

Problems can crop up, though, if people think that the natural habitat garden they're paying for looks akin to a weed patch. "If it's an existing development, it has to have curb appeal, so in most cases you have to have plant material that looks good all year round," Schendorf notes.

And this is where the landscape manager must pay attention to detail and explain the concept to skeptics. "It's a lot of education of the client and you have to be on top of the client's structure," Schendorf stresses. "It's not just the client; it can also be their bosses or residents, who may want a manicured look."

A scenario can develop where "the property manager's boss who flies in from Chicago is going to pull up in front of the building and say, 'What on earth is going on here?' And if the property manager says, 'We're attracting birds,' that might not work," he warns.

• **Choose customers carefully.** "It's best to work with customers who are willing to listen to the educational part of my program," says Dr. Fernando Agudelo-Silva of FAS Technologies in Berkeley, Calif. "I've recognized that some clients are not going to like it."

Schendorf suggests that existing

clients are more likely to go for a natural habitat site, especially those who enjoy an ongoing personal relationship with their landscape manager. "If you know a client who goes hiking on weekends or who likes bird watching, then you have an 'in' to discuss their interests." You can explain that "we're able to choose a plant that attracts birds, or that attracts whatever you want."

• **Be aware that each property and each natural habitat site requires individual planning and attention.** "You can't have a recipe book," Agudelo explains. "One of the characteristics is that each landscape program is customized—and that can be an advantage or disadvantage."

• **Take your time pricing.** "It's so site-specific," says Schendorf. "Actually, you're taking better care of it than if you went in and cut everything down. Sometimes it's more expensive than taking care of it in a traditional manner. One of the main problems is getting rid of plants you don't want. There may be upfront costs to replace areas" overgrown with undesirable species. Usually native plants are best obtained from smaller nurseries because the larger ones tend to concentrate on growing plants that are more popular.

—J.G.

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Other needs are fresh water, tall trees that provide lookouts for adult male butterflies on the hunt for a mate or protecting their turf, and rocks for basking.

"The butterfly garden is maintained in a more relaxed state than the crisp, manicured look usually expected in urban gardens. Knowledge of which plants provide nectar, which provide food, which provide shelter, and which are places for pupae to form and mature guide our rotative plant choices," Novy points out.

No-spray zone—"Each area of the garden has special maintenance needs, so we designed specifications just for this garden," Novy says. Pesticides are not used here.

"The butterflies don't know where their garden ends and the rest of the grounds begin, so strict integrated pest management is necessary throughout the entire gardens. Cuttings from trees, shrubs and



groundcovers are placed in piles for up to a week. This allows caterpillars to crawl away and seek alternative living plants.

"Near these piles of clippings are plants that are larval food sources. Flowers are

detailed frequently to encourage abundant flower and nectar production, but discolored or disfigured leaves are left as-is because there may be caterpillars grazing, eggs laid on the underside of the leaf, or caterpillars molting in leaves that have been pulled together," she cautions.

"Mowing heights of turf in the butterfly garden were raised to three inches and the turf is not edged. Around the boulders, the turf is allowed to grow taller," Novy recounts. "What attracts butterflies to our garden also attracts birds and other insects," she adds.

If you decide to seek these types of projects, educating yourself is the first hurdle—then you can get to work on educating potential customers.

Agudelo-Silva suggests that you seek information from your local extension agent and enlisting consulting services from an IPM specialist such as himself.