

HOMIE

& Garden

Lynette Evans

Oh, please, not summer quite yet

What was with last weekend's 90-degree days? My garden and I aren't ready for it to be summer.

Normally, I'd have my tomatoes and peppers set out by now, but, given that little snafu with the seedlings and the clove oil early on and the dreary spring weather, the seedlings remained small and compact. April ended with cold showers and May opened with spring winds, warm but gusting to more than 30 mph, and it seemed prudent that the plants stay safely ensconced in the greenhouse.

Then, boom, Sunday the winds subsided and the sun beat down, prompting us to pull the shade cloth over the greenhouse. Gardeners in other areas may be just starting to get their beds ready for planting — or in many parts of the Midwest, waiting for floodwaters to recede — but the first hot day in California sends me into a frenzy, convinced that I'm missing the peak growing days because every bed isn't planted out. The plants in the greenhouse seem to believe it, too, and overnight they shot up and started to grow leggy and root-bound.

The tomatoes are ready, but the garden isn't. The spring plants — the various peas, onions, fava beans and broccoli — aren't ready to relinquish their beds to the summer crops suddenly crowding the greenhouse. What to do?

I ripped out the 2-year-old chard, leaving only the plants I started early this spring, and we've been uprooting a couple California red onions for roasting each evening, even though they could stand a few more weeks in the ground. We pulled the volunteer spring garlic and John turned a handful of the mild bulbs into a great poor gardener's soup. (He sauteed chopped garlic lightly in olive oil, added stale bread and water and cooked the mixture until smooth, then ladled it into individual oven-proof bowls, cracked an egg into each bowl and stuck the bowls under the broiler until the eggs set.) Like the artichokes, newly cut and steamed, and the freshly cut asparagus, lightly roasted, that go into dinner, the garlic soup lunch is a treat that only gardeners can truly know.

To make more room in the beds, this week I will pull out the purple broccoli that was supposed to put out multiple heads but instead made only philodendron-size leaves, and harvest the cabbage that are heavy-headed but probably not as sweet as those that have weathered frosts. Although I've planted more, in hopes of cooler weather for the next month, the leaf lettuces began to bolt in last week's heat.

As night falls, the Dipper is directly overhead and the barn owls begin their swooping flights — back and forth from vineyard to willow tree to owl house, feeding their chicks. The evening air is balmy and alive with cricket song, accompanied by one bullfrog singing bass. It is starting to be summer, even if the beds and I are not quite ready.

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ERIC LUSE / The Chronicle

Flora Grubb is putting down roots for herself and her garden and design atelier in the Bayview, where her neighbors are a chandelier builder and a slate importer.

Flora Grubb Gardens, a nursery and design studio that premieres today, will help keep Bayview growing

GROWTH STOCK



SHARON RISEDORPH

Flora Grubb Gardens was designed so that people can go there and "fall in love with plants."



ERIC LUSE / The Chronicle

Grubb's earlier experience includes learning to sell outdoor furniture as well as landscaping gardens.

FLORA GRUBB'S mother is a psychic and palm reader who could have foretold her future, but, given her daughter's name, anyone could've guessed she would head into the garden business.

Grubb's eponymous nursery and design atelier opens its doors today at 1634 Jerrold Ave. in San Francisco's Bayview, a mostly treeless, neglected neighborhood that is witnessing a renaissance of businesses. Her nursery is noteworthy because it breaks away from traditional nursery models. Grubb's audacious enterprise brings wholesale and retail plant and furniture sales as well as a sophisticated garden design studio and garden consultancy business under one roof.

"I am a self-taught gardener," Grubb said. "I never went to school for it, but I started gardening as a kid."

Zahid Sardar
Design Spotting

This column by The Chronicle's design editor, about new homes, design ideas and personalities, appears one Wednesday and one Saturday a month.

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KATY RADDATZ / The Chronicle

A homemade pond in Nick Czap's backyard in San Francisco.

'You've got fish!' Building a backyard pond

By Nick Czap
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

A pond, simply put, is a hole filled with water. An ornamental pond is a hole filled with water plus an assortment of plants, some fish and a pump, which filters the water and causes it to bubble or splash in a pleasing way.

If it sounds simple, it is. Why more people don't think to build them is a mystery. Everyone who looks into the backyard of my San Francisco home and sees my water feature reacts with shock or

awe or a combination thereof.

"It's beautiful!" "Is that a water lily?" "Oh look, you've got fish!" "How long did it take you to make that?"

"A day," I tell them.

"Amazing. Did it cost a lot?"

"Four hundred bucks."

If we were discussing the latest iPod, they'd probably buy one with their next paycheck. But no matter how hysterical they get over the lily pads, none has taken the plunge, probably because they're city dwellers and don't own a shovel, an essential tool.

Get one, and the rest is straightforward.

First, calculate the dimensions. Assess the size of your yard and determine how much you can dedicate to a water feature. Then decide where to put it. Factor in enough space between the edge of the pond and any landscaping features you want to leave intact. For the construction method described here, a rectangular pit lined with pliable rubber, allow a minimum of 1 foot. Then there's the question of depth. Three feet straight down is a good figure.

This has to do with the feeding habits of raccoons and great blue herons. Raccoons will wade into a pond with sloping sides and devour your fish. Great blue herons, which hunt by tiptoeing around in the shallows and spearing fish with their bills, cannot tiptoe in 3 feet of water. (Although raccoons do come poking around from time to time, I haven't lost any fish to them or to herons because I've always built fairly deep ponds with straight sides.)

The Bay Area climate is ideal

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Architect realized owners' dream

► NURSERY
From Page F1

Well, not quite self-taught. This ebullient 33-year-old is from a family of English-style gardeners "who had huge magnificent gardens in Pennsylvania," she recalls. They were even a little eccentric and one uncle grew cacti there. "My father (a builder and a hippie) would buy me a six-pack of plants," she said, and as a teenager whose early gardening sessions had clearly become addictive, she found herself filching samples from public gardens in downtown Austin, Texas.

She dropped out of high school in the ninth grade, but her first job, at 15, with a group of women who made gourmet dressings, became her salad days: She learned about running a business.

In her mid-20s, Grubb arrived in San Francisco, dabbled with dot-com jobs and ran a landscaping business with her brother Joseph, who has since veered toward architecture. Then she met Saul Nadler (who just turned 30), her future business partner, who had hired her to help him with his garden.

"Saul was a classically trained chef who enjoyed the process of making a garden and thought it would be a fun business," Grubb said. "It was such a great opportunity, but I did not say 'yes' for a long time," she recalled, because hands-on gardening meant so much to her. "It took me less time to say yes to my fiancé Kevin's proposal!"

Four years ago, Grubb and Nadler bought the Palm Broker on Guerrero Street — which was comprised of a run-down fenced yard and an old trailer with a few palms — and turned it into the Guerrero Street Gardens, "a complete garden center with the Palm Broker as a specialty," Grubb said.

Besides plants and palms, Grubb started to sell garden furniture and also offered information she had learned on the job as a landscaper. Hollywood and Las Vegas garden designers — and also celebrities such as Janet Jackson and Metallica lead singer James Hetfield, who lives in Marin —

found out about the center.

Too big too soon and with their lot under the development gun, "Two years ago we were forced to start looking for a new place," Grubb said. It was tough going until her current landlord learned they were looking and invited them to consider his property.

"Louis Levy is an amazing man. He e-mailed us his ideas," Grubb said. The half-acre site belonged to his family and he viewed himself as a custodian of it as well as of the neighborhood.

"He wants this area to be an artistic center and light manufacturing hub for artists and do-it-yourselfers. We were his ideal tenant," said Grubb, who happily signed a 20-year lease. "Next door we have a chandelier builder and a slate importer. Louis is trying to find more people like that to keep this flavor of San Francisco alive."

In the serendipitous swirl that Grubb so often finds herself in, she had designed gardens for architect Bonnie Bridges, in whose office Grubb's brother Joseph now works. "When we needed a building she was an obvious choice. She is an avid gardener and was always one of our best customers."

Bridges, a modernist, became the perfect catalyst for Grubb and Nadler's dream.

"I asked Flora to tell me what her future building would feel like," Bridges said. Although the young entrepreneurs were essentially running several businesses, including selling large quantities of palm trees across the state, they had no experience building from scratch.

"We had to eke out the information. Flora sent me two paragraphs describing what they wanted," Bridges said. Besides the design atelier and business office, Flora Grubb Gardens was to be "a place where people come and fall in love with plants and a place where there would be a connection with the outdoors," Bridges said.

All that would require a lot of room, and since the budget was small, Bridges leaned toward a pre-engineered structure. She ordered the seismic steel even before the layout was quite complete be-



Photos by ERIC LUSE / The Chronicle

Architect Bonnie Bridges created spaces at Flora Grubb Gardens that flow seamlessly into one another and are well lit all day.

cause the price of steel was scheduled to rise. "They risked everything and trusted us," Bridges said.

What they got was a skylit warehouse, store and design studio under one roof and a canopied outdoor garden next to it. Altogether it is 200 feet long. Within the 8,000-square-foot, two-story warehouse/design studio made of prefabricated metal parts from Stoltz Metals in Richmond and Polygal plastic sheathing, Bridges created discrete spaces that flow one into another seamlessly and are well-lit all day.

Some walls are clad in recycled barn wood from Heritage Salvage in Petaluma, because while getting permits for LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification was too expensive, Bridges and Grubb were keen on having green elements in the building. Radiant heating in the ground-floor concrete slab (reinforced with steel because it is over a liquefaction zone) and in the lightweight concrete upper floor, ceiling fans' cross ventilation for passive cool-

ing and photovoltaic solar panels for plant lighting make energy conservation and temperature control a breeze.

"It is also sustainable because steel is a strong recycled component, and we were able to get the maximum enclosure for the least amount of material," Bridges said.

They kept the original concrete paving on the lot for parking, adding to their LEED-worthiness if they should ever seek it in the future. Bridges also chose Matarozzi/Pelsing Builders for their reputation for conservation. Garage doors on the front are designed to roll up to integrate indoor and outdoor displays, and even on foggy days the heated floors remain comfortable. "At night the Polygal walls have a sexy glow," said Bridges, ever conscious that sustainable design can also be pretty.

Grubb got what she wanted. "I did not want it to look like any nursery anybody had ever been in, and it doesn't," Grubb said. "We also had no experience in retail or the nursery world, and we hired people who had never worked in a nursery."

"We did not know what we were doing. When we started at Guerrero, we had to go get a cash register quickly," because no one had thought about it. But because they were from outside the industry, Grubb and her staff have found a fresh approach. They've even tucked in a Ritual Coffee booth under the stairway to add a different kind of buzz in the neighborhood.

Add to that a range of furniture displayed from Janus et Cie, with showrooms in Los Angeles and San Francisco, and Fermob, a French company, and Grubb's vision for "cool" outdoor living becomes clearer.

"Many of our staff designers say it is always challenging to find affordable and not tacky furniture for the garden," said Grubb, who picks aluminum, steel and concrete over teak, which she finds cliched.

"I wanted to be an environmental biologist," Grubb said, but she has no illusion that she will ever go back to school. Instead, she is becoming an environmental alchemist and the nursery will be her classroom as well as her podium.

"I'm learning quickly. The



Flora Grubb wanted a nursery that didn't look "like any nursery anybody had ever been in, and it doesn't."

things I really like are color and plants that conduct light. Not just leaves that have a lot of color but plants that have a certain reflective quality," Grubb said.

"When they are lit from behind or directly they glow with more than one color . . . they are almost iridescent in a way," she said. That accounts for an inventory of colored and textured plants such as crimson Leucadendron 'Safari Sunset,' blue/green Acacia itea-phylla and 'Blue Glow' agaves.

"In California there is a huge native plant movement," Grubb said. "But I have an interest in nonnative species."

"I've lost interest, for the most part, in just natives, I try not to say it too much because I do think native plants are incredibly important, but they do not have much to do with ornamental gardening in the city. I just want urban gardens to be pretty and kind to the environment," she adds.

Happily her favorites, such as acacias, agaves, aloes and other succulents, require little water and for the nursery Grubb wants more

plants that fit that framework. But if Grubb sounds flippant, she also knows what she's doing.

"It is incredibly important that you don't use plants that are potentially invasive. Good nurseries have good programs. We don't sell plants that have a risk of being invasive," Grubb said.

And unlike other nurseries which might say that watching out for such plants is the gardener's job, Grubb believes it is hers. "Most gardeners don't know about invasive plants. Spanish broom is still sold in nurseries and it is running wild. I think as a nursery person I have a responsibility to tell people what it can do because it has no natural predators here."

On the other hand, Grubb will go out on a limb for exotic foreign species. "Native plants are not what makes my heart sing. My gardens have to do that for me."

If you have ideas or comments about this column, e-mail Zahid Sardar at zsardar@schronicle.com.

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