

Flora With a Star in Its Corner

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LOS ANGELES

Just about everyone in Los Angeles has a cause, but Rene Russo's is a decidedly lonely mission. While many of her Hollywood peers use their celebrity to exalt the hybrid Prius or bash Republicans, she is championing plants that many homeowners are unfamiliar with or, worse, dismiss as weeds.

Ms. Russo has become an advocate for the use of California native plants, which she is trying to promote as a low-maintenance panacea for the region's water supply uncertainties.

"People have equated natives with chaparral, with brush, with dead, and it's erroneous," she said with obvious frustration in an interview at her Brentwood home.

To prove her point, Ms. Russo offered a tour of her lush garden on a recent Sunday morning while off from "Yours, Mine and Ours," a remake of the 1968 Lucille Ball-Henry Fonda comedy she is filming with Dennis Quaid.

Ms. Russo, 51, said her own schooling in natives came more than five years ago, after she and her husband, Dan Gilroy, a screenwriter, bought two houses on three acres in the Santa Monica mountains. As the couple, who have an 11-year-old daughter, set out to remodel the bigger house, Ms. Russo hired a garden designer to help her identify the tangle of flora that grew around the houses and along a steep hillside.

"There was lawn everywhere," she said. "Oaks were dying," she added, from overwatering. She decided to discard two-thirds of what was there - invaders like weeping willows, acacias, Brazilian pepper - and replace them with California buckeye, Coulter pine, pitcher sage and dozens of other native species. About three-fourths completed, the garden needs very little pruning and watering - every three weeks in the summer and not at all in winter - and absolutely no fertilizing, she said.

Ms. Russo's devotion - she has lent her high profile to fund-raisers and public events promoting natives - shows in the design of the contemporary home she is renovating. It is almost all glass, and even the front door, studded with windows, offers a generous view of her California Tecate cypress, lilac and yellow-berry toyon.

"I love the garden more than the house," Ms. Russo said as she walked down the rugged paths of her property.

But native gardens are an anomaly in Ms. Russo's and most neighborhoods here. The azaleas, camellias, roses and trees that grow around many homes, native plants advocates argue, are better suited to the East Coast or to Hawaii than to the semi-arid and desert climate of the West.

"The palms, the bird of paradise, that's the way people think California looks," said Mike Evans, the owner of the Tree of Life Nursery in San Juan Capistrano. "It's a God-given right to have a big lawn."

Some real estate agents say that good landscaping can add 10 percent or more to the value of a home, and for most homebuyers, that includes a traditional lawn. "A lawn is definitely a plus," said Clifford Rowe, a real estate agent in Brentwood. "It makes the house look more expansive."

Officials with the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, the cooperative of cities and water agencies in Los Angeles and five other counties, are leading the pronatives campaign. Switching from turf to natives, they said, could reduce residential irrigation water by two-thirds. Irrigation water accounts for as much as 70 percent of daily per-household consumption.

But there is that image problem, and the personal and cultural values that favor a manicured turf. "Most folks are very intimidated about the first step, and worried about their dogs having lawn, entertaining, value of their homes, rats, things like that," said Garry George, a board member of Audubon California who gives presentations around the state to promote natives. "They also worry about whether their gardeners will be able to deal with them. I tell them to get rid of the gardener."

The water agency's pitches for desertlike landscaping (cactus and rocks) during the drought of the early 1990's did not help, some officials admit. Also, California's wildfires have given some homeowners the impression that natives are more of a fire hazard than other plants, which water district officials say is incorrect; on the contrary, they say, many natives, like the showy penstemon, are fire-resistant.

And many homeowners are not impressed by the raves from pioneering native-plant gardeners who favor the natives' wilder look and the butterflies, hummingbirds, dragonflies and lizards they attract.

"They don't really want to attract that much wildlife into their yards," said Lynn Lipinski, manager of the water agency's "California Friendly" program, which promotes the natives.

Some homeowner associations refuse to give up their standard green lawns, even as they struggle to keep water bills down. "What do you put in if you give up a lawn?" asked Dr. Howard Dawson, a retired veterinarian on the board of the Chapala Homeowners Association, representing a gated community of 151 homes in San Diego. "The people here from Arizona don't want to see more stone gardens."

Joe Barron, a landscaper for Chapala and other residential areas in San Diego, estimates that natives make up as little as one percent of the preferred flora among his clients because Southern Californians "want to see green year-round" and lean toward tropical plants.

"We've become spoiled and want a green oasis at home," he said. "People don't like to change, especially if it's pretty. People would rather up their association fees than give up their green."

But some homeowners are clearly discovering natives and liking them. Access to natives took a leap forward last year when the largest independent nursery chain in the state, Armstrong Garden Centers, introduced its own line of 130 native plants it called the "Spirit of California." The line draws only a small minority of Armstrong's customers, "but it's a growing part of our business," said Gary Jones, the chain's director for marketing.

For some homeowners, water bills and maintenance have been the deciding factors in converting. Doris Gallan, the director for external relations at the University of Southern California, said daily watering and the need to replace faulty sprinklers finally convinced her and her husband to rip out their lawn and grow a native garden in their property in Glendale. The work will start this summer, and the couple have warned the neighbors. "We're trying to be sensitive," she said, but they are unsure of the reaction the garden will get.

"Most people don't know what you mean when you say natives," Ms. Gallan said. "We explained it to them and they said, 'Oh.' "

Some landscapers said that artificial turf and ground covers that mimic lawns but require less water are also becoming popular. Ms. Russo is planning to add a patch of drought-tolerant grass to her garden in deference to her husband, who hails from upstate New York and wants to see some lawn.

Water district officials also sell the concept of California-friendly plants, arguing that foreigners from places like South Africa and Australia, as well as some of the inevitable turf, can co-exist with the natives.

Ms. Russo, though, said she only promotes natives. She is considering opening up her private garden among the canyons and winding roads of Brentwood to limited public viewing once it's finished.

"I'm a California girl," she explained, "and I'd love to restore a sense of place to Southern California."