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## **A natural fit**

An innovative water purifying system and native landscaping bring nature to the parking lot of a Tustin naturalist store.

**By CINDY McNATT**

The Orange County Register

Paradise paved is not what Marty Rigby would have chosen for the landscape around his natural-science store, housed in a Greene-and- Greene-inspired building in Old Town Tustin.

"The city had me squeeze in 35 parking spaces here. I told them that I didn't need that many, but they wouldn't budge."

Parking is a pickle for this historic shopping area, and city officials were adamant that Rigby provide his share. So the native-plant lover with a Ph.D. in water resources and a passion for nature built an innovative water-purification system and turned the unpaved perimeter of the lot into a showcase for a variety of native plants.

Success is achieved by grouping natives into the plant communities, or the biomes, found in nature - riparian, coastal sage, oak savannah and woodland.

Each group contains plants that huddle together in the wild. The riparian garden begins with a backdrop of arroyo willows underplanted with wild roses and spice bush.

The coastal garden pops with Matilija poppy, Rhus, sage and sycamores.

The oak savannah, with its young trees, is temporarily underplanted with wildflowers such as penstemon, clarkia and California poppy.

A bog and surrounding man-made spring in the woodland area are crowned with a small grove of redwoods. Flagstones are stacked to serve as mulch for Pacific Coast iris, yellow monkey flower, wild ginger and red columbine.

What is most intriguing about the bog is the way Rigby purifies the runoff here before it drains to the street.

Commercial properties are required by the state's Clean Water Act to purify runoff before it reaches the sewers, says B.J. Azarvand, a senior building inspector for Tustin. Most businesses use mechanical clarifiers.

Rigby had another idea.

He sought and gained permission to grade his property so that seasonal water drains to the rear, then to the side, then through the bog he created. In the bog, the plants and soil pull harmful chemicals out before the water drains to the street.

"Sewers, you know, drain to the ocean," said Rigby. "With a quarter-acre of hard surfaces here, including the roof and the blacktop, that's a lot of pollution."

Rigby says purifying the water is simple. The concept is to slow the water and have it run through 20 feet of grasses, cattails or whatever plant works in the landscape before it reaches the street.

Large items like cigarette butts and coffee cups - what Rigby calls the macro junk - are cleaned out first by hand. Then the heavy metals like zinc, used in auto brake linings, are extracted by the plants and soil. Last, certain bacteria common in soils gobble up harmful substances such as residue from gasoline emissions and petroleum byproducts from asphalt.

"It's not an exact science," Rigby said. "Anybody could do this."

Growing native plants is the tricky part of the project.

Succeeding with natives in a commercial setting is "not for the casual gardener," said Rigby. "There is a lot to learn."

Still, he says, he finds more and more people interested in natives.

"We send people in three directions to find out how to garden with natives. Tree of Life Nursery in San Juan Capistrano, Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden in Claremont, and the California Native Plant Society."

Rigby typically spends at least one day a week deadheading, pinching, pruning and cutting back to give his garden a groomed appearance.

"Despite what people think, natives are not low-maintenance plants."

Yet he is so passionate about these plants, local wildlife and water resources that in addition to devoting his retail store to these subjects, he also strives to plant local neighborhoods with native trees.

"Every fall I give away oak trees. Customers can come in and pick up a free oak for their property. *Quercus agrifolia* support a wide range of nesting birds and local woodpeckers, but they are disappearing fast in Southern California. Our goal is to have 10,000 new oaks in our area in 10 years," he said.

The Acorn Naturalists store was launched by Rigby's wife, Jennifer.

"She used to advise teachers in science curricula, but they always asked for materials."

Jennifer stocks the store with wild-bird books and supplies, natural history books for all ages, and interactive science kits for children and adults. After 15 years, the couple's knowledge of natural history and science has evolved into a vigorous mailorder and retail business.

## **TO FIND OUT MORE**

### **Native plants:**

Tree of Life  
(949) 728-0685

Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden  
(909) 625-8767

California Native Plant Society, Orange County chapter  
Meets the third Thursday each month at 7:30 p.m. at Irvine Ranch Water District, 15600 Sand Canyon Ave., Irvine. Go to [www.occnps.org](http://www.occnps.org).

### **Water purification information:**

The Ecological Society of America ([www.esa.org](http://www.esa.org)) says water purification is one of the many services provided by ecosystems. Pollutants such as metals, viruses, oils and excess nutrients are processed and removed as water moves through wetland areas and riparian zones.

What can you do at home to promote clean water?

Avoid over-fertilizing your lawn and over-treating with pesticides.

Do not pour pesticides, oil, fertilizers and other toxic waste into sewers, toilets or drains.

**Become active:**

Support proper community planning that considers effects on waterways as part of all urban, industrial and agricultural development.

**Resources**

Acorn Naturalists  
155 El Camino Real, Tustin, CA 92780  
(714) 838-4888 or [www.acornnaturalists.com](http://www.acornnaturalists.com)

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