A Thanksgiving paean to eccentric gardeners

By Don Shor
A tolerance for eccentricity seems to be a hallmark of avid gardeners. Perhaps it is because obsession is one of the characteristics of eccentricity, and obsessive interest in certain types of plants is common, even celebrated. When non-gardeners learn, for example, that I'm a longtime member of the bamboo society they tend to squint a bit and say something like "there's a bamboo society?"

In this Thanksgiving essay, I'd like to express my appreciation for some old gardeners, long gone, who showed me that eccentricity and obsession were okay. That if being "really into that" was weird, then it's ok to be weird.

I grew up in a neighborhood with 29 Ph.Ds.
There's a back story to this.
When Roger Revelle was recruiting staff for the new UC San Diego campus next to La Jolla, he faced one clear obstacle: realtors in La Jolla had a "gentleman's agreement" that they would not sell or rent to people with Jewish surnames.
Revelle famously said in a speech to the local Chamber of Commerce that they could have their restrictive covenants, or they could have the considerable benefits of the University of California, but they couldn't have both.
They gradually relented, but meanwhile he and some assistant professors bought land just west of UCSD from a sympathetic property owner and subdivided it. A lottery was held for the lots, and our subdivision was born, populated mostly by young researchers and professors at Scripps Institute of Oceanography and UC San Diego, including several with Jewish surnames (one recalled being "politely shown the door" by a local realtor when inquiring about a house on the market nearby).
This concentration of higher degrees in one neighborhood gave me an early introduction to the oddities of scientific minds. "Absent-minded professor" is a valid stereotype. The man across the street was a brilliant underwater physicist, but he couldn't set a gopher trap. You can't put that many Ph.D.'s into close proximity without engendering a pretty high level of eccentricity.

It wasn't until I read the works of Gerald Durrell (*My Family and Other Animals*) that I realized where our household fell on that spectrum.
I suppose I could have noticed that my friends didn't have menageries. The ducks in the back yard, the steady series of tarantulas (13 total, each named Charlie), parakeets we bred in the greenhouse, the toucanette that methodically killed them, the parrot named Nuisance, 18 desert tortoises in the back yard (later donated to the San Diego Zoo), the barn owl and seagull and other injured birds we recuperated (in the same greenhouse, birds also donated to the zoo, along with the murderous toucanette). My sister collected stink beetles: Eleodes, aka pinacate beetles, they squirt stinky fluid when disturbed. Someone raised mice in the bathroom. We kept horned toads and alligator lizards in terraria. I remember a spider monkey, and I had box turtles. Oh, and a couple of dogs as well.
And the dead menagerie. Birds that hit the big living room windows were carefully wrapped and kept in the freezer (labeled, fortunately) until they could be delivered to the Natural History Museum for use in their dioramas. Did I mention the skull collection in the playroom? The biggest was from a Kodiak bear. There was a buffalo skull on the front porch, that Dad fitted with red light bulbs in the eye sockets for Hallowe'en each year.

But curiously, in a neighborhood full of scientists this wasn't considered especially unusual. Mom was just the resident naturalist, the one who could answer questions about wildlife and to whom injured animals were brought. The guy down the street knew about beaches and sand, the one on the corner studied moon rocks, and lived across from the whale expert.

Odd flowers

Celebrity sightings in our area tended to be Nobel laureates. Mom delighted to tell the story of looking out, young wife of an assistant professor, to see Roger Revelle and Harold Urey (1934, chemistry) on her front porch puzzling over the bloom of her *Passiflora alato-coerulea*. The patio fence was covered with passion flower vines because the new low-budget landscape needed quick results.

That one turned out to be a mistake due to its invasive nature in the frost-free climate. I spent many teenage hours digging it out. But Passiflora flowers are fascinating and lovely, many have great spicy fragrance, and there are less vigorous forms available.

Passiflora 'Blue Horizon'

Some are host plants for caterpillars of the Gulf fritillary butterfly, and many Davis gardeners plant passion flower vines for that purpose. Our freezing weather here keeps the vines somewhat in check.

If a flower had odd structure or a curious pollination mechanism, Mom grew it. I was introduced to stapeliads at a very early age. Their strange star-shaped showy flowers are pollinated by flies attracted to the scent, which is like rotten meat. Ceropegias have bizarre flowers shaped like little cages. Cactus that bloomed at night were special favorites.

A love of strange flowers with odd pollination habits leads inexorably to the stapeliads. Succulents from South Africa in the milkweed family, they have flowers that attract flies by means of fetid scent: they smell like rotten meat. Shown here are *Stapelia scitula* (above) and *Stapelia variegata* (right).

Passion for punkins

One neighbor, Tom Whitaker, was a USDA geneticist who bred varieties of head lettuce, and hybridized amaryllis with crinum lilies (for fun, I assume). But his real passion was "squarsh and punkins," as he pronounced them, which he grew in great variety out at the USDA field station. My very first job was tying up cantaloupes with pantyhose in his research greenhouse (they're scratchy, and it's hot in there). He avidly collected seeds of cucurbits worldwide, and published extensively on their science. I mostly remember how he exulted in the giant gourds he had collected in Central America, some so big a child could have crawled inside them. "Look at that feller!" he would exclaim as he pointed out the biggest one.

Tom was a quirky guy who taught me how to double-dig beds for sweet peas. He was delighted when I went to UCD, since he was an alumnus (1927).

He had one of the strangest gardens I've ever seen: if he liked a plant, he would dig a circular area for it about six feet across, mound up the soil, and plant it in the middle. No rhyme or

reason to the design, just a Dr. Seuss-like collection of plants he happened to like. Sort of a botanical zoo.

Dudleyas

Carl Hubbs, an ichthyologist by profession, had an extensive collection of Dudleya species. Those are succulents with powdery-grey leaves that grow along our coastal cliffs. Eccentric? That would be his large collection of pickled hagfish, a species about which he was the world's foremost expert. My mom worked for him, and I sometimes helped her in his office in the old Scripps building where these eel-like suckerfish gazed down at us balefully from their pickle jars of formaldehyde.

Dudleyas are coastal California natives, but many are well adapted inland. This is *Dudleya farinosa*, native to Northern California and Oregon. Many species are more grey or blue in coloration, making them great for contrasting foliage in containers or mixed plantings of succulents.

I guess I did well enough, because in later years he and his wife hired me to help in their garden, which was a marvel of flowers and succulents and palms and flowering trees. A lush dichondra lawn, columbine, jasmines, fuchsias, roses, aloes and hen-and-chicks; it was a great mix of classic border flowers and subtropicals and xerophytes, all laid out along meandering paths with step stones that led out to the eucalyptus grove beyond, with a view of the ocean. Working for other neighbors was a chore. Working for Dr. and Mrs. Hubbs was a delight, and I've retained a fondness for Dudleyas all these years because of them.
Some of the few succulents in the nursery trade actually native to California, these are great plants for your low-water garden.

Rare native pines

Naturalist Guy Fleming had spent his career as superintendent of state parks for Southern California, and worked to get the remaining stands of Torrey pines, a rare pine species native only to the coast near La Jolla and the Channel Island of Santa Rosa, protected. Ultimately the Torrey Pines State Natural Reserve was established just a couple of miles north of our neighborhood. The Flemings planted a landscape almost entirely of indigenous native plants, with just a few subtropicals for showy flowers. He grew and gave seedling Torrey pines to many of the neighbors, hoping to help re-establish the species locally.

Torrey pine has two personalities. Along the cliffs, subjected to constant sea breeze, the trees are contorted and picturesque with the look that bonsai growers aspire to. Inland, even just a few blocks from the ocean, the Torrey pine is tall to 50 feet or more, and straight with a magnificent spreading crown. Unfortunately, as the only tall, straight tree in Southern California's lowlands, they were logged out nearly to extinction. Considered one of the most endangered pine species in the world, they are hardy in Northern California. There used to be a specimen here in

Mansion Square, but it was removed as it began leaning toward the buildings.

Nostalgic for fall color

Jean Kramer was not an academic, she was longtime office assistant to chemist Linus Pauling. Jean was from New York and was determined to get East coast fall color in her garden, so she planted a Liquidambar tree in the back yard.
Remarkably, it did turn color every fall. Honestly, fall color looks pretty odd when it's basically beach weather every day, but even then I admired her determination.

Planting for fall color is certainly worthwhile! We have a lot more choices than Jean did. I don't recommend liquidambars due to their surface roots and spiky seed balls. Aside from Chinese pistache, some local trees that give great fall color here include ginkgo, crapemyrtle, and hybrid maples.

Jean made the best matzoh ball soup I've ever tasted. Those realtors didn't know what they were missing.

That UCD alumnus:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_W._Whitaker

Some of the other gardeners:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carl_Leavitt_Hubbs

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guy_Fleming

That guy who couldn't buy a house in La Jolla:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_D._Goldberg

Lagerstroemia 'Zuni', a purple-flowered crapemyrtle variety, has great fall color as well as showy summer blooms.

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Addenda and errata:

The picture featured on the web version in The Davis Enterprise is Stapelia scitula. My picture of Stapelia variegata was featured on the print edition on the teaser on page one.

Thanks to an alert reader, I have confirmed that the pine tree in Mansion Square was a grey pine (*Pinus sabiniana*), not a Torrey pine (*P. torreyana*). Warren Roberts, Superintendent emeritus of the Arboretum, tells me that there are Torrey pines in the U.C. Davis Arboretum, "about 9 mature trees: by the redwood grove, in the Mary Wattis Brown collection of California native plants, and a grove of 5 next to the Louise and Eric Conn Acacia Collection. We also have several mature gray pines east of California Avenue bridge."
Grey pine is native to Northern California, and Torrey pine has been planted in some areas. Jepson Herbarium has this useful link to distinguish the species:
http://ucjeps.berkeley.edu/eflora/eflora_display.php?tid=38304

Torrey pine photo from Wikimedia Commons by https://www.flickr.com/photos/tatler/. Taken at Torrey Pines State Reserve, December 2006

Written for the Davis Enterprise, November 26, 2017
http://www.davisenterprise.com/features/gardening/a-thanksgiving-paean-to-eccentric-gardeners/