

Using Native Plants for Landscaping the New Tassajara Bathhouse

Diane Renshaw

In August 1993, Tassajara suddenly closed the old bathhouse for safety reasons and immediately began an accelerated program to replace it. Architectural plans for the new building did not include landscaping, and Teah Strozer, who was director at that time, was hopeful that native and drought-tolerant plants might be used. Since I had some familiarity with Tassajara and professional experience with native plants, Teah approached me with some questions, and I was happy to do what I could to help.

As the building progressed, Barbara Kohn became the new director and Gloria Lee the head gardener. We realized how wonderful it would be to surround the new building with plants from the Tassajara area so that it would eventually look like it had always been there, a perfectly natural addition to the landscape. The first step was deciding what to plant and where to plant it. Fortunately, we had a draft document put together by David Rogers, a resident at Tassajara in the late 1970s, that describes the flora of Tassajara in detail. Relying heavily on David's work, we came up with a list of plants that would be attractive and at the same time fit into the surrounding streamside and woodland setting.

A major challenge was that essentially none of these local species and varieties of plants were available in any commercial nursery. Gloria and I realized that we would need to collect seeds and cuttings and rear the planting stock at Tassajara. With the invaluable assistance, contributions, and advice of Paul Kephart, a nurseryman and native grass specialist, we started in on the propagation project in the fall of 1994. During that winter and on into the spring, summer, and fall of 1995, we collected seeds and cuttings; rescued plants from roadside slides; explored and marked plants for return visits; and paid careful attention to the natural cycles of these plants. Tassajara built a small greenhouse behind the shop to shelter cuttings and seedlings. Gloria found that she had taken on becoming not only a gardener but also a botanist, native plant expert, and propagation artist, all at the same time. Her determination and success in doing all of this and more has been critical to this unfolding story.

Rearing our own plants meant that it would take several years before they would be ready to plant. In fact, we found out that some of them could take the better part of a year just to germinate! Although at this

point both Gloria and I had a rough idea of what we wanted to plant, we felt that Tassajara needed to have some sort of master plan or at the very least a set of drawings for future reference. In addition, we felt the need for some significant guidance with the design aspects of the planting. With good fortune we received a gift of just such assistance from several able landscape professionals. Alice Russell-Shapiro and Lucille Biesbroeck-Hannah of Stephen Marcus Landscaping visited the bathhouse site with Teah in the summer of 1994, and donated not only their time but a selection of plants that were installed in the earliest days of the project. Alice and Lucille returned to Tassajara several times in the summer of 1994 and again in the summer of 1995, and helped us to come up with a working sketch of the existing and future plantings. Pamela Burton of Burton & Company came in the summer of 1995 and provided similar counseling. We are very grateful for everyone's generous contribution of time and attention. Following the advice of these experts, Gloria planted a row of big-leafed maples along the walk across from the baths, an arch of coffeeberry at the entrance to the Suzuki Roshi Memorial path, and screen plantings of California lilac.

Our general approach has been to strive for balance between restoring a completely naturalistic setting, and planning and planting a garden landscape along more conventional lines. In the front of the bathhouse we have been leaning more towards the traditional, decorative approach; in the rear we have been letting the ecosystem's own process of regeneration shape the outcome.

Behind the bathhouse in the winter of 1994 the creek overflowed its banks, deposited several feet of sand up to the deck on the women's side, and washed out soil behind the men's side. Work period volunteers moved rocks and sand; Anna, the bath attendant, arranged them to create a dry stream, and Paul and Gloria planted feathery native bunch-grasses—red fescue and Idaho fescue. Then we simply waited to see what would come up. Our main job up to now has been to pull the few weeds that appear and leave the rest. This, of course, means sharpening our eye so we can identify the weeds from the natives when they are tiny seedlings; when in doubt, we leave a plant until we can identify it.

The list of native plants recolonizing the back of the women's side has grown quite long. Some of the



Mimulus aurantiacus



Head gardener Gloria Lee rescued some of the native plants from slides on Tassajara Road.

more conspicuous ones include hedge nettle, mugwort, willows, California everlasting, red monkeyflower, lizard's tail, and fiesta flower. We planted a Dutchman's pipe vine by the women's soaking tub, where we hope it may attract the Dutchman's pipe swallowtail butterfly.

Behind the men's side, the moister habitat has given rise to mugwort, yellow monkey-flower, and red willow. We have planted the overflow area with rushes and sedges that we propagated, and with some other beautiful species that we found in a native plant nursery: western clematis, planted against the dividing screen, and leopard lily beneath the trees.

In front of the bathhouse, large native bunchgrasses fill the space between the men's side and the footbridge. These were interplanted this spring with several kinds of lupine and with specimens of red delphinium. Other plantings in the front include western redbud, a big-leaved maple and a sycamore, pink-flowering currant and coral bells, and a coast live oak. A small patch of native meadow on the women's side is slowly beginning to fill in.

Between the walkway and the roadway the garden is characterized by variety. Some plants are garden ornamentals; some are natives, collected and propagated by Elkhorn Nursery from plants in this general geographic region. These have become established quickly and have given us something to enjoy while we work at raising the natives.

We are finally now beginning to use some plants and seeds collected from the Tassajara valley or along the road, and propagated over the last year and a half. Some favorites include dark red, spring-blooming hummingbird sage; low blue-flowered mounds of coyote mint; the beautiful apricot-flowered local variation of sticky monkey-flower; California fuschia, a bright red late-summer bloomer; and the familiar elegant clarkia, which in the late spring grows in drifts on the surrounding hillsides.

Volunteers have appeared in the front as well. The natives are particularly welcomed, and some of the garden escapees are permitted to stay where they fit the overall design scheme. Woolly mullein, a tall, fuzzy garden plant with grey-green foliage and a spear of yellow flowers, volunteered from the compost and grew in front of the men's side last summer, attracting much attention. Cleary sage, iris, evening primrose, and feverfew are refugees from the lower garden that are quite at home across the road from the baths.

Keeping a close eye on these introduced ornamentals lest they become problematic weeds will be a critical part of the long-term plan. When we start to cultivate a spot within the wilderness, we should accept the responsibility of ethical gardening: making sure that our planting activities aren't introducing or spreading undesirable plants into the surrounding wild lands. Problematic weeds are particularly well-adapted to the bare, disturbed soils that remain at the end of a construction project. Once the soil surface is covered with mulch or plants, these weeds are less likely to seed in and spread.

In the meantime, we are trying to pay attention to what the seasons bring, learn from our mistakes, and do our best to minimize problems. Restoring a native plant landscape is a very long-term project, and the

Trichostema lanatum



Calochortus albus

trick is to set the right combination of elements in motion that will eventually carry this vision into the future.

If you can visit Tassajara this summer, please take a few leisurely moments to enjoy the native garden project around the new bath-house.