

Carol Bornstein

HER WORK Horticulturist, garden designer, writer; director, the Nature Gardens and Live Animal Program, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, Los Angeles, California

HER LANDSCAPE “Old-growth chaparral with gnarled manzanitas, dimpled bigpod ceanothus, and buckwheats. But I also love the desert.”

HER PLANT JOURNEY In the past twenty-five years, the branch of the plant world focused on native plants has been particularly vigorous. In an increasingly urban world, as well as one of ever-more degraded, fragmented, or lost natural habitats, native plant experts and advocates are points of connection addressing—consciously or not—multiple urgencies on both human and environmental fronts.

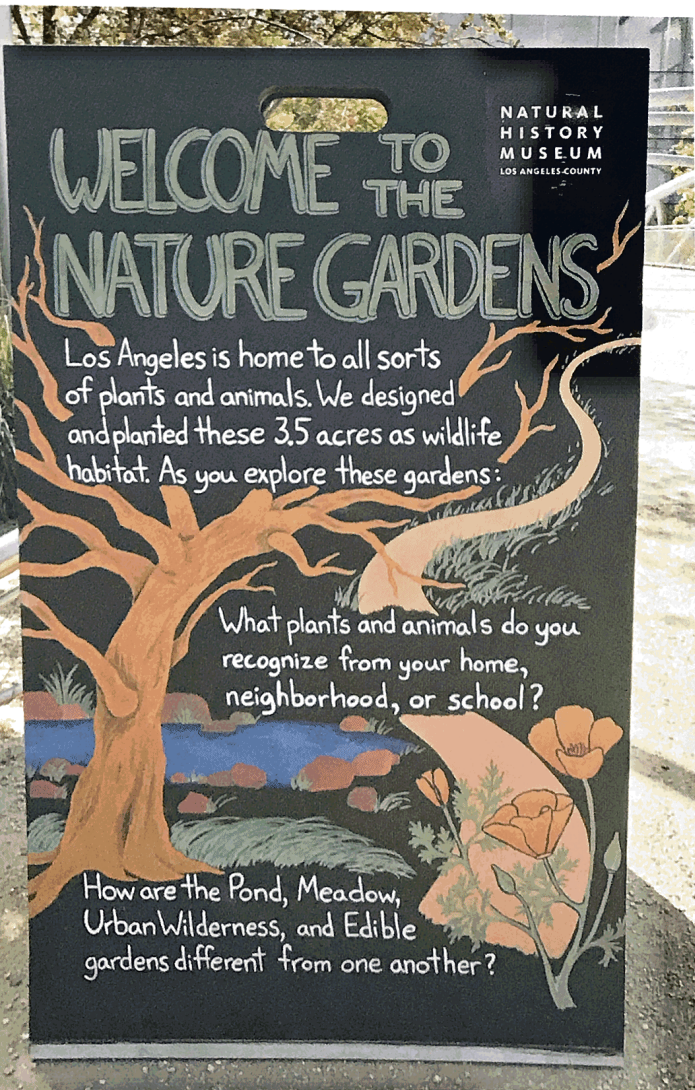
Carol Bornstein is one of California’s most highly respected native plant experts, and the state, with its highly diverse flora, is a global center for native plant research and education. Carol has devoted much of her career to lauding California’s native plants and the benefits of designing gardens to work with the realities of their natural environments. Native plants provide beauty, a sense of place, and essential habitat support for wildlife. Native plants are also well adapted to the soils and climates of their own region, so their informed/thoughtful/appropriate use in the landscape reduces the amount of supplemental water, fertilizer, and pesticides needed for healthy growth.

As interest in landscaping with native plants has increased, obstacles have emerged—or emerged again. Carol explains, “There were several earlier efforts by horticulturists in California to heighten awareness and appreciation of and access to native plants in the cultivated landscape. So while the subject wasn’t new to me, certainly the time was right to run the message up the flagpole again. Obstacles to landscaping with natives include the limited availability of

“Discovering garden-worthy plants from the wild or in cultivated landscapes is a joy”



A colorful and evocative chalk-board sign welcomes visitors to the Nature Gardens. Similar interpretive signs throughout set a tone of creative, informative, and participatory engagement for visitors to the urban oasis.



native plants in the nursery trade and getting reliable information on how best to grow natives successfully in a garden setting—which can be tricky.”

One of Carol’s earliest industry jobs was at the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden as plant propagator. She worked at SBBG for twenty-eight years, moving into the position of director of horticulture, where she oversaw the living collections, retail nursery, and plant introduction programs. Her love of grasses inspired her “to transform the garden’s iconic meadow into a centerpiece for native bunch-grasses and wildflowers.” She also worked on the design and construction of the Home Demonstration Garden, Southern California’s first water-conserving, public-demonstration, residential landscape featuring native plants. Under her leadership, the botanic garden’s retail nursery became the premier source of California native plants on the central coast. Several of Carol’s introductions from this time have since become popular cultivars, such as *Verbena lilacina* ‘De La Mina’, *Corethrogyne filaginifolia* ‘Silver Carpet’, and *Salvia* ‘Pacific Blue’.

A notable drought hit California in the late 1980s and early 1990s, impacting how garden staff interpreted the garden and worked together—they began really focusing on communicating the positive impact of gardening with native plants. “I worked very closely with the director of education on developing interpretations for new living displays, crafting and coordinating several landscape design symposia, and writing articles and pamphlets about gardening with natives.”

The concept of aesthetically *and* environmentally valuable native plantings was new to this generation of the plant-loving public and really opened people’s eyes and minds to the possibilities of plants that met their aesthetic standards, provided for native wildlife, and used far fewer inputs of water, fertilizer, and maintenance when appropriately sited in gardens. In the two game-changing native plant gardening books she coauthored with Bart O’Brien and David Fross, *California Native Plants for the Garden* (2005) and *Reimagining the California Lawn* (2011), Carol helps expand the palette of native plants for gardeners and landscape designers to consider and provides detailed information on how to keep these plants happy and looking beautiful in a variety of settings.

In 2012, Carol shifted and expanded her perspective once more, taking the position of director of the nature gardens and live animal program at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County—a truly urban environment. The 3.5 acres of “urban

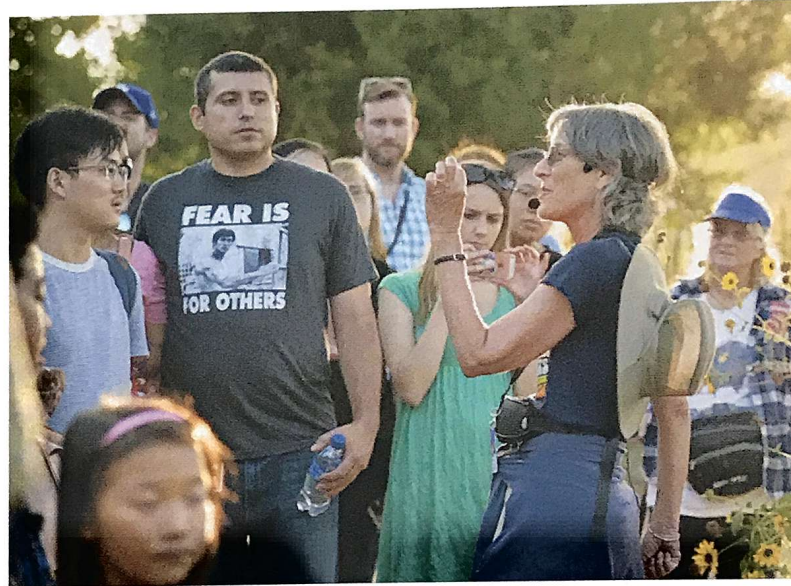
nature,” created in large part out of former museum parking lots, were still under construction when Carol arrived. The master plan for the multimillion-dollar project had been developed over several years with museum staff and the designers at Mia Lehrer + Associates (now Studio-MLA), an award-winning urban landscape architecture firm known for thoughtful and culturally resonant landscape solutions and designs in the LA area—including some seminal regreening of the LA River.

“With almost one million visitors a year, these still-new gardens introduce so many people to nature, many of whom have little to no experience with the natural world. The gardens are a much-needed example of the complex relationships and interdependencies between plants and animals, as well as a model for how to create a garden that respects and reflects sense of place and how to tend it responsibly.”

Carol has—she noted with humor—started taking a lot more pictures of birds and insects under the influence of her more animal-centric Natural History Museum colleagues. But she hasn’t been tempted away from plants yet. She continues to seek out exceptional California garden plants and to share her knowledge through writing, teaching, and public speaking. Her latest cultivar introduction—*Encelia californica* ‘Paleo Yellow’, an unusually pale bush sunflower—exemplifies the easy-to-grow, attractive, and habitat-supportive characteristics she espouses. “Such garden-worthy selections make the act of gardening rewarding for the gardener and, better still, for the planet as a whole.”

OTHER INSPIRING WOMEN

- ♦ Beatrix Farrand (1872–1959), American landscape architect
- ♦ Gertrude Jekyll (1843–1932), British plantswoman, garden designer, and writer
- ♦ Mary Carroll, botanist, horticultural historian, and writer, Santa Barbara Botanic Garden, Santa Barbara, California
- ♦ Isabelle Greene, landscape architect, Isabelle Greene & Associates, Santa Barbara, California
- ♦ Naomi Fraga, director of conservation, Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden, Claremont, California
- ♦ Pamela Berstler, executive director, Pacific Horticulture Society; cofounder of G3, Green Gardens Group, Los Angeles, California



Carol sharing her enthusiasm for and knowledge of California's native plants with visitors at the Nature Gardens.