

Native SON

Dave Buchanan Takes Landscaping Back To Nature

By Louise Julig

Dave Buchanan is the most unique landscaper I have ever met. In fact, the term "landscaper" isn't even really sufficient. Using an appreciation of California native plants garnered from a lifelong affinity with San Diego County wild areas, Buchanan is more of a habitat creator, bringing oases of natural environment into the city one yard at a time. Low key and affable, he is the sole proprietor of Ocean Sage Landscaping in Encinitas, the business he created in 1989 for landscaping with California native plants.

Creating native plant environments is a labor of love for Buchanan. I can speak to this from personal experience. Four years ago he remade my own yard from an overgrown, pine-tree-heavy mess into a pleasant, good smelling, low maintenance surrounding. It's friendly for kids and other critters—hummingbirds are regulars in my yard as are lizards, butterflies and honeybees. It's also easy on the water bill.

And while low water usage is frequently touted as a benefit of using natives, Buchanan said, "The main thing that I like about them and like to emphasize about them is not just the water savings—it's to give the plants back that are rapidly disappearing from all the special areas that I've hiked and explored from San Diego north. That experience of those smells and those birds and that feeling of privacy and serenity that used to be more easily obtained—I just find that I find it more in my own yard now, and I try to emphasize to people that you can create a place such as that for yourselves and also for some of the birds and insects and animals that live here that will find a connection to an environment that is disappearing."

The connection with those special areas began for Buchanan when he was a boy growing up in San Diego. The son of a military man, he recalls being in the canyons "coming back with sagebrush all over our jeans from playing and making forts." The sights and smells of those areas stayed with him, and he sought out further places to explore down dirt roads in the backcountry as he grew older. But the path to his present occupation wasn't a straight one.

After leaving the University of San Diego after four years without graduating, ("I majored in baseball and minored in going to the beach," Buchanan said), he apprenticed as a

lather, a construction trade that lays the foundation for exterior plastering, and began a 12-year stint working commercial construction. During that time he moved to Encinitas near Stone Steps with a ballplayer friend. "We fixed up the yard with the standard grass, Coral trees and Melaleuca. Then my friend got married and moved out and I had the whole place to myself. The

yard was my pride and joy with my meticulously cut grass. Of course my Dad couldn't drag me out of bed to help him with the lawn when I was growing up," Buchanan said.

After a few years he moved to another house nearby, and his new landlord gave him carte blanche to do whatever he wanted with the yard. At that time there was a native plant nursery in Encinitas, Weber's, which had been written up in a local paper. He checked it out "and the first thing that hit me was the smell, the fragrance of all the plants, the sagebrush and the sage. It was a really moving experience because it just brought me back to the days of my youth, playing in the canyons."

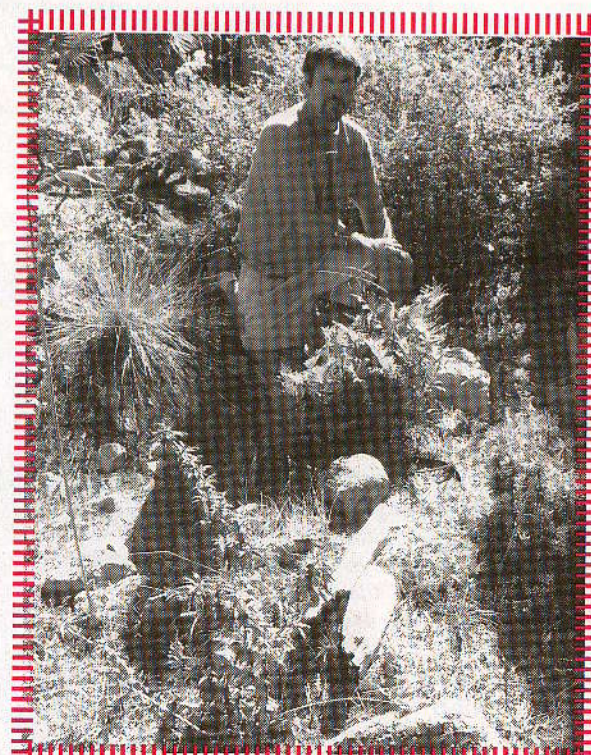
He started talking with the owners and researching native plants on his own through books and trips to native plant gardens. "I also started observing everything I saw in nature, and with the help of the people over at Weber we did a little design and I planted my yard in 1985. And for 20 years now I've been putting and nurturing and changing things and observing and experiencing my own garden."

A few years after planting that yard, Buchanan was getting burned out at his construction job, so he started to think about doing something with native plants.

While on unemployment between jobs, "on the Jerry Brown surf team, they called it," he got an opportunity to landscape his landlord's cabin in the southern Sierras, and then a friend's new yard in Escondido. "He hired me by the hour to do his yard and I pretty much learned all aspects of landscaping on that job—irrigation, drainage, lawn. I did a plan with California natives and installed it and it just did wonderfully." After that another referral came and more word of mouth spread.

He has landscaped many yards from San Diego to Escondido, but tries to keep mainly to the coastal North County area. One large, acre-and-a-half property in La Costa that Buchanan said is almost like a small botanical garden, has been featured in San Diego Home and Garden magazine. He has also landscaped for Carlsbad surfer Taylor Knox and did the La Jolla home of Elisabeth Ecke.

In true Surf City style, Buchanan keeps things pretty low key. Although he could do more, he only takes on as much work as he can do himself with one helper, and prefers to hire out major work such as tractor service and hardscape. "I could have crews and I could have a fleet of trucks, but I enjoy doing the work myself... basically, I just do not want



Encinitas resident Dave Buchanan runs Ocean Sage Landscaping and is a proponent of native California plants. Photo: John Ibricks.

to be run by my business instead of running a business. I like to travel; I like to have time to putter in my own yard. I don't want to be answering the phone and worrying about it all the time."

Several yearly trips with his brother to Baja, Anza Borrego, and occasionally southern Utah are regular parts of Buchanan's schedule. "We go out into the most remote places we can find and hike and surf and fish and just generally enjoy the world with no people," he said.

There is a personal benefit to incorporating native plants into our lives, Buchanan said. "We spend our lives working and toiling and sitting in traffic here in the city and when we go on a vacation we go camping or somewhere in a beautiful area. You're walking through a beautiful wild seashore or you're up in a forest or in a campground and you're enjoying all those sights and smells and animals and birds. And then (you) come back to a big giant patch of lawn and plants you see at Home Depot in the parking lot. Why not bring some of those (native) plants into your own yard? They're available, from the smallest coastal ground cover to 20-foot Manzanitas that you'll see up at Julian. A lot of those things are available. Bring a little bit of nature back home."

Dave Buchanan's Ocean Sage Landscaping can be contacted at oceansage@cox.net.