

Award Winning Landscapes on Free Tour

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On Saturday April 8th the landscapes selected for the 2017 Water Saver Tour will be open for inspection from 9am until 3pm. The tour is free and self-guided.

All the landscapes are in the same league as Sue Mellard's property at 8615 Turning Leaf in Fair Oaks Ranch in that they deal with typically shallow rocky soils with low water use landscapes that are distinctive and attractive.

In Master Naturalist Mellard's case the emphasis is on a yard that welcomes wildlife in addition to conserving water. She has been so successful in that direction that the Texas Parks and Wildlife has awarded the property designation as a Best in Texas Backyard Habitat.

Sue's landscape principles are as interesting as the plantings.

- The property backs up to a green belt and some of her neighbors have extensive plantings. To maximize the impact on area wildlife Sue has sought to compliment the habitat around her that includes an abundance of oaks, hackberries, cedar elms, cedar, huisache and lawns. One result is that she emphasizes the planting of small trees and large shrubs to increase the overall habitat value. Redbud, Mexican plum, Mexican buckeye, rusty blackhaw viburnum, anaqua, agarita and possumhaw holly are a major part of the landscape.
- Butterflies are a favorite target of Sue's plantings. To do her part for restoring the Monarch population she offers both native and tropical milkweed, lantanas, salvias, mint marigold, and copper canyon daisies. I asked about mistflower but she said it was one of the favorite deer browse plants and did not last long.
- Birds utilize brush piles, shrub thickets, and small trees for cover from predators, as nesting sites, and for both insect and plant food sources. A small recycling water feature is a center of bird activity.
- Sue has a "minimal control" attitude about the wildlife she attracts. There is no fence between her and the greenbelt so deer can and do enter the landscape to browse on the plantings. Her more delicate plants are grown in containers on the large patio. She says "most of the time" the deer leave the patio plantings, including the large decorative hanging baskets, alone. Her list of frequent visiting species include raccoons, grey fox, opossum, snakes, toads, frogs, and lizards in addition to the birds and butterflies.
- Rock is an important part of the hill country and that importance is reflected in this landscape. Rock filled drainage stream beds weave through the property and help slow down rain runoff. Paths use decomposed granite and flagstone as an attractive functional surface.
- There is a limited amount of turf area that serves to open a view into the center of the backyard and is a favorite area for the family pets. We noted that the lawn area was green and mowed low. The dominant plants were annual bluegrass and horseherb. A sustainable winter lawn!

In addition to Sue Mellard's property in Fair Oaks Ranch, five other properties in the area between IH 10 and Kyle Seale Parkway are included on the tour. They are in The Village Green, Stonewall Estates,

Sonoma Ranch, and on Babcock Road. The Gardening Volunteers of South Texas (GVST) selected the landscapes and organized the tour. Visit their website at www.gardeningvolunteers.org for the addresses and a map plus temporary access codes to gated communities where they are needed. Docents from the GVST will be on hand at each of the sites to serve as your guides and to provide a plant list. The San Antonio Water System and the San Antonio River Authority are sponsors of the Tour.