



# SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

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## Life

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### GARDEN GONE WILD!

## Master Gardener's urban oasis earns Certified Wildlife Habitat designation

By LINDA SULLIVAN BAITY, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT  
May 13, 2017 5:45 AM

*Editor's note: Master Gardens of Santa Barbara County is a new monthly feature that explores the gardens of UC Master Gardeners.*

What do a friendly pooch named Kali, a fat kitty named Zena, a 26-year-old turtle named Leo, seven parakeets, five chickens, a family of tree squirrels, a pair of chipmunks, a tubful of goldfish and countless bees, butterflies, ladybugs and hummingbirds have in common?

They all belong to the happy menagerie lovingly tended to by longtime Santa Barbara resident and UC Master Gardener Julie Constantinides.

Mrs. Constantinides and her husband, Chris, have lived in their charming early-20th-century house on upper State Street for five years, and in that short time, they've managed to create an urban oasis that teems with all manner of life — both wild and tame. Her efforts have earned her a Certified Wildlife Habitat designation by the National Wildlife Federation, which is celebrating Garden For Wildlife Month this May.

Born in upstate New York in 1959, Mrs. Constantinides moved to Santa Barbara as a young girl, grew up on the Westside and graduated from San Marcos High School. She met and married her husband here 32 years ago, raised three sons, and now they're living in Mr. Constantinides' childhood home.

"The house has stayed in the family, but it had been a rental, so we had a lot of work to do. We began by removing the grass in the front yard because I knew I wanted to take care of a garden instead of a lawn," said Mrs. Constantinides. "We kept my ...

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Julie and Chris Constantinides' front yard features an eclectic mix of edibles and ornamentals.

LINDA SULLIVAN BAITY PHOTOS

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mother-in-law's rose bushes and calla lilies for sentimental reasons, but everything else came out."

Once the grass was gone, Mr. Constantinides built the picket fence and Mrs. Constantinides started planting. Today, Mrs. Constantinides' front yard is a model of edible landscaping expertise, with its eclectic mix of vegetables, fruits, herbs, bulbs, vines and flowering perennials. The bounty and variety she has managed to achieve within her compact urban lot is truly a sight to behold.

The first thing passers-by notice are four tall tomatoes growing in wooden cages (also built by Mr. Constantinides), with cucumbers and squash covering the ground, stands of onions, dark heads of kale and barrels of lettuce. A huge herb bed of borage is heavy with plump purple blossoms, while blackberries and grapes clamber over the fence and a vigorous passion fruit vine encircles the picture window.

Mrs. Constantinides attributes her obvious horticultural talents to growing up in a family of farmers and gardeners, but she had never been formally taught until several years ago.

"I had taken a leave of absence from my job as a maternity nurse at Cottage Hospital and was looking around for something useful to do, and for some way to give back, so I applied to the Master Gardeners program and was thrilled to be selected."

After completing the rigorous training, she started volunteering at La Huerta Historic Garden at the Santa Barbara Mission, which gave her a chance to put into practice what she'd been learning in class — particularly about how to care for her backyard orchard.

"We have guava, cherimoya, pear, apricot, olive, fig, banana, bay, orange, lemon and lime trees that were all planted from seed by my father-in-law 50 years ago. They had been so over-limbed (over-pruned) by landscapers, I was afraid they might not survive. But I've learned how to prune them properly since I became a Master Gardener, and now they're all coming back strong."

A stately old pomegranate shades the patio out back, while the other trees march along the southern and western edges of the couple's cozy backyard. There's even a Bacon avocado growing in the front yard.

At ground level, color on the property is provided by bright red pops of geraniums, yellow sunflowers, blue lobelia and hot pink fuchsia. One of Mrs. Constantinides' favorite plants is the citronella geranium, with its lacy leaves and delicate lavender flowers. But the plant's most memorable characteristic is the strong citrus scent released when the leaves are crushed. Legends abound regarding the plant's purported ability to repel mosquitoes, even to its supposed origin as a genetic cross between a geranium and citronella grass, both of which have been debunked by researchers.



Top to bottom, Monarch caterpillars find a safe haven here.

Containers of edibles such as lettuce grow alongside in-ground plantings.

A salvaged bathtub provides fresh water for birds and pollinators.

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"This is the easiest plant in the world to propagate — basically, you just break off a growing tip, stick it in the ground and stand back. It's hardy, low-maintenance, pest-free and always in bloom. Who cares about mosquitoes!"

All active gardeners need a dedicated, and preferably behind-the-scenes, area to do their "dirty work," and Mrs. Constantinides' side yard provides just the right location to conduct repotting and propagation activities, and to store her tools and supplies. One long table holds her large collection of succulents. She has a designer's eye for creating eye-catching vignettes that mix bowls of succulents and colorful ornamentals with funky art pieces and found treasures.

The side yard also contains four plastic bins, each of which is teeming with red worms. It's a convenient spot for her to feed the wriggling masses with kitchen waste and to harvest the rich "black gold" compost they produce, which, over the years, has transformed her formerly hard-as-a-rock clay soil into the fertile, friable loam prized by gardeners everywhere. She skips the fancy worm bins advertised online and opts instead to use ordinary heavy-duty storage boxes with holes drilled in the bottom for drainage and the top for air. Another tip for would-be vermiculturists: "Keep eggshells whole so the worms can snuggle up together inside."

Mrs. Constantinides' garden is a protective sanctuary not just for worms, but all manner of creatures. Trays of seed for wild birds, saucers of water for bees and butterflies, and jars of nectar for hummingbirds are everywhere. She even feeds the squirrels "to keep them out of the bird feeders." Being designated a Certified Wildlife Habitat means that her garden provides a constant source of food, water, shelter and places to raise young. One fascinating example of these principles in action is her dedicated efforts to attract and nurture monarch butterflies. Like many local gardeners, she plants milkweed, which is the monarch's host plant. Whenever she spots an adult laying eggs, she covers the entire plant with a mesh laundry hamper as protection from predators and disease. This not only ensures survival, but it provides Mrs. Constantinides' with a front-row seat to watch the entire life cycle, from caterpillar to chrysalis to brand-new butterfly.

This kind of close, careful observation is second nature for Mrs. Constantinides. She notices even the smallest changes before they become bigger problems: pulling emerging weeds, picking ripened fruit and dealing swiftly — and organically — with any pest that dares to attack. While some may think that sounds like a whole lot of work, to Mrs. Constantinides, it's a daily source of comfort, serenity and joy. She's out in her garden every day, not because she has to be, but because she wants to be, and that's the true secret to her success.

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Linda Sullivan Baity is program coordinator for the UC Master Gardeners of Santa



Top photo, Julie Constantinides shows off her home-grown bananas.

Middle photo, tomatoes, roses, onions, squash and salvia peacefully co-exist in the front yard.



for the UC Master Gardeners of Santa Barbara County. Do you have questions about your home garden for the Master Gardeners? Contact the Helpline by calling 893-3485 or emailing anrmgsb@ucanr.edu. To find more gardening resources, go to cesantabarbara.ucanr.edu/Master\_Gardener or www.facebook.com/sbmastergardeners.

**FYI**

For more information about receiving a Certified Wildlife Habitat designation by the National Wildlife Federation, go to www.nwf.org/garden.

**YOU SHOULD KNOW**

"Spring Gardening with Tomatoes, Butterflies and Bees!" is the topic of a free public workshop presented by the UCCE Master Gardeners of Santa Barbara County to be held from 9:30 a.m. to noon May 20 at the Central Library's Faulkner Gallery, 40 E. Anapamu St.



MASTER GARDENS Santa Barbara County  
Julie Constantinides, Santa Barbara

UC Master Gardeners Valerie Rice, author of the blog "Eat Drink Garden," and Joan Calder, author of "Airplanes in the Garden," will discuss the best tomato varieties for Santa Barbara, what plants are best to attract pollinators, how to build a native bee house and more.

For more information, call 893--3410 or go to cesantabarbara.ucanr.edu/.

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