

# The Coastal Rose

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CCRS GARDENER OF THE MONTH:

## Stephenie Caughlin

A Power Gardener In Paradise

When Stephenie Caughlin sent in her membership to the California Coastal Rose society, she sent a brochure describing her "garden," the Seabreeze Organic Farm in Arroyo Sorrento. That name misleads the unsuspecting visitor. This "farm" is an explosion of multicolored power-grown plant life cascading down and around two acres of hillside terraced like a Mediterranean Villa. The impact of the site is too much to absorb in one visit: two hundred rose bushes, innumerable dahlias, a grape arbor, fruit trees every imaginable species of color plant, and vegetable patches which contain over twenty varieties of lettuce. All of this is pest free and organically grown, too. The hillside is a mountain of garden surprises.

I knew what the land had originally looked like. Two decades ago I had ridden horses over it regularly, through the chaparral and eucalyptus that covered the hillside, often spotting bobcats, coyotes, deer and rattlesnakes. I used to top on the hilltop and view Torrey Pines Preserve and State Beach, and the Pacific Ocean. I hoped that the land would somehow not be destroyed by developers. Tough some of it is now in developer's hands, it's heartening to find that one person has been able to preserve and even improve the original land. Even though high rise offices aren't too far away, Stephenie is still visited by the snakes and bobcats, and she has added some wildlife friends to assist in her gardening. Three frog ponds house what Stephenie calls the "armored division" of her insect control program. Other elements include wasps, ladybugs, lizards, and simply maintaining harmony with the environment.

Stephenie's farm supports her comfortably. She harvests vegetables each day and sells them at various farmers'

markets along with fruit from trees, grapes from the arbor, eggs from the chickens, and every imaginable species of cut flower. For Del Mar residents, Stephenie has a home delivery service. After looking at produce which no market products which I've seen could ever compete with, I asked if she sold to large market operations. Her answer was emphatically, "No." "I feed my neighbors first," she said.

I asked her how she was able to depend on an organic system for such a large operations. She restates the strong commitment to environmentalism which carried her through the rough times. For her there was obviously no other way. She explains that the transition to organic methods isn't easy and involves some losses and some patience. She is fortunate to have been the first person to have farmed her land, so that she had no pre-existing problems to correct. There are also no close neighbors to send garden problems her way. Strong organic feedings support the plants here. It's a high-horsepower garden-horse manure power that is. Stephenie works it into the soil, raw or composted with earthworms. Knowing that my own horse eat Bermuda grass hay, I asked what she did about all the weed seeds that go through horses. Stephenie laughed and explained that once a seed has gone through the stomach of a horse and earthworm, there's not much left of it. She can pick out the weeds that get through.

As she inspects her plants, she must traverse miles of winding, creatively installed pathways inspecting each row of plants. It's easy to believe the garden isn't sprayed with anything that could only be done by a smokejumper pilot.

As we traversed the garden we picked off and sampled edible flowers, quite a delight, and Stephenie explained

the nutritional value of various plants. I walked through kale and comfrey plants taller than I was, and they radiated health. Stephenie pointed out rare species of plants, chickens, and turkeys which she raises for their heirloom value. She explained that large seed companies and poultry firms capitalize on a few easy-to grow species and many valuable species of plants and animals are falling by the wayside in American farming. She showed me a "Scarlet O' Hara" morning glory, chicken with exotic feathery crowns, and even the den of an iguana.

We visited the propagation greenhouse in which at least 50,000 seeds were being germinated, and the seedling flats outside held another 50,000. These would be planted in carefully planned combinations and rotations which supported each other and would keep the garden growing year round. A compost pile of horse manure was in evidence, but did not have the customary flies. This must be the work of the frogs and the most abundant lizards. Presumably the snakes kept the gophers at bay elsewhere in the yard, for I didn't see any holes or chewed plants. Lettuce planted in that area might become instant rabbit food, but three attentive dogs were probably Stephenie's rabbit patrol. Harmony with nature was evident all around.

In the past I have associated organic gardening as a series of deferential compromises, certainly not with the power statement that is Seabreeze Farms. I have heard of animals taking on their owner's personality, but here was an entire garden reflecting its owner's personality, strength, confidence, and boldness. Rather than plead with the world to work with the environment, Stephenie Caughlin dares the world not to.