

Louisiana Certified Habitat
Kay Bray & Greg Gilman
Lafayette, Louisiana

Description of Property

The property is a 87.5 X 125 ft. lot near downtown Lafayette in the Cornay Extension, otherwise known as the Saint's Streets. The small home on the property was built in 1947. We purchased it in 1980 and it has been our residence ever since. It has been remodeled but its foot print is the same.

The area is noted for its mature trees. There are three Southern Magnolia trees located at corners of the our lot, leading one to wonder if they were used for property boundaries. There is also a very large sycamore tree about six feet from the West side of the house. Neighbors next door have huge pine trees, oaks, pecan trees, hackberry, and magnolias. Next door, a sweet gum tree has served raccoons from time to time. The trees drew us in as well.

Motivation to Conserve/Restore the Site

We were no doubt motivated to garden from generations before us who were more connected with nature. But here, I will address more recent times: 1970's to present. We were young and the times they were a changing. In amongst the mix was a "back to the land" movement. We moved from Houston to Natchitoches, in the woods, walking distance from the mighty Red River. The rent was \$25 a month: no indoor plumbing, no A/C, no kitchen sink, and no bathroom. Fortunately there was electricity and there was a cistern to catch rain water from the roof. Also there was a fire place which, blessed be, was soon replaced by a wood stove.

Greg, my husband, is a "handy man". I must mention the "outhouse" that he built. He dug a very deep hole. It was quite amazing. The throne was round and had a red heart shaped seat. There was no door on the outhouse—only a quilt top curtain that I made. From there was a view of the garden and the woods beyond replete with inspiration. Lime took care of the nasty part. Greg really doesn't want me to write about this as it may have been illegal and people might think we were crazy. But I say it's part

of the history of how we took a path that led us to gardening and native plants.

Greg started our first vegetable garden at Natchitoches. It was close to Grand Ecore actually. He found a very helpful book, How to Grow More Vegetables by John Jeavons about the biodynamic/French intensive method of horticulture. Also, Greg's parents had been gardeners and he remembered them composting leaves. He went into town and gathered bags of leaves that the residents had placed on the roadside just for him. He made a huge compost pile that served the garden very well. There was a patch of garlic which was already in place when we moved there. We assumed that area behind the house was probably used for gardening before we attempted it. That might have something to do with how our first garden did so well. I had never seen such huge collard greens. We lived an adventure there for about two years.

I will skip a few years to 1977 when we moved to a country house East of Broussard and Hwy 167. Yes, it was still country then, and Greg made a garden there too. All the difference was in rice hulls from Mr. Norbert's horse stables and rabbit manure from our venture into raising rabbits. (We couldn't eat those precious rabbits though.) It was another beautiful vegetable garden. Nice fluffy black soil. Unfortunately, we were there for only about two years; as the landlady needed the house for her daughter. We had to move to the city.

A Walk in Our Garden

In 1980 we bought our house in the Saints Streets. The house was set in the typical lawn. There were nice well established camellias, azaleas, and of course, the wonderful trees. In the beginning, we focused on remodeling the house; much of which we did ourselves. We added a two car garage and workshop. A dog yard/potting shed replaced the old asbestos sided garage in the back of the property. We built a wooden fence around the back yard. (Have you ever tried to use a motorized post hole digger?) All the while, we both worked full-time jobs. For many years "gardening" was limited to mowing the yard.

However, there were things that started to "grow." Greg got a tiller and in the back yard he began to contour some areas to help with drainage and add some interest that a flat lawn does not have. He called it a "turtle

back”. He put in two raised planters for herbs and such. Then he planted *Gingko biloba* (gingko) seedling and a *Taxodium distichum* (bald cypress) seedling. They are now huge beautiful trees. *Spirea prunifolia* (bridlewreath), *Osmanthus fragrans* (sweet olive), and a *Magnolia liliiflora* (Japanese magnolia) were added. It’s kind of a blur now; but I do remember a nice stand of *Verbena canadensis* (homestead purple verbena) back there. It was a start.

Our garden really began to grow when we were so fortunate to meet Mr. Bill Fontenot at an Audubon meeting in Lafayette. In 1996 he designed a plan for our yard. Since he had a native plant nursery at the time, we were able to get many plants from him. We still don’t have all the plants that are on the plan, but we are working on it. I just recently found a *Cyrilla racemiflora* (swamp cyrilla) to plant. It had been waiting patiently on the plan all these years. Thank you, Mr. Bill.

I will mention a few of the native trees we have. In the front of the house we planted *Magnolia virginiana* (sweet bay magnolia) that is growing tall. On the West side of the house under the sycamore tree there is now what I call a *Aesculus* (red buckeye) forest—which I love. Along the backyard fence, we planted *Carpinus caroliniana* (American hornbeam) and *Hamamelis virginica* (witchhazel) trees. Most of the trees have done well. A couple of them had some issues. A *Morus rubra* (red mulberry) didn’t get enough sun where it was planted so I removed it. The *Chionanthus virginicus* (graybeard) tree was almost uprooted by the hurricanes this year, 2020. We were able to set the graybeard back upright, brace it, and pack more soil around the side where roots were lifted. Looks like it will survive. Not so with the *Juglans nigra* (black walnut) that my mother had propagated and given to us. It grew very large and beautiful. Then the squirrels made such a mess of it, girdling the limbs, that we sadly decided to cut down. Very sad.

Here is a description of the combo of native flowers and shrubs that have done well and are some of my favorites. In the front of the house and on the side that gets the most sun, south, southwest: *Echinacea* (coneflower), *Symphytum officinale* (comfrey), *Salvia coccinea* (tropical sage), *Trillium* (toadshade, under the camellias), *Erythrina herbacea* (Mamou plant), *Hydrangea quercifolia* (oakleaf hydrangea), *Chaenomeles* (Japanese quince), and *Salvia leucantha* (Mexican bush sage). Oak leaf hydrangea has thrived under the *Magnolia grandiflora* (Southern magnolia).

Really gorgeous. *Malvaviscus arboreus* var. *drummondii* (turks cap) behaves itself there. Look out if you put it in full sun. You will be overrun with pesky birds, butterflies, and bees.

Just a few more favs in the South front and West side of the house:

Phytolacca decandra (pokeweed) just showed up on its own with some assistance from birds. (No, don't put it in a salad.) I also like *Achillea millefolium* (yarrow), although some say it can be invasive. I didn't realize I had so many favs: *Stokesia laevis* (stokes' aster), *Hymenocallis liriosome* (white swamp Lilly), *Cuphea micropetala* (Mexican cigar plant), *Ruellia humilis* (trailing ruellia) for great ground cover, and *Salvia elegant* (pineapple sage) that humming birds love. To frame it all, *Ruellia brittoniana* ("Katie" dwarf ruellia) makes a nice border next to the street.

Moving on now to the shaded back yard. I should say the garden though. More classy. Beginning from the back porch and the patio we follow the limestone gravel path counter clockwise as it tracks a relaxed oval through the garden. The first bed just behind the house has a *Lonicera sempervirens* (coral honeysuckle) winding its way up a trellis that Greg built. Thank you, Greg. In front of that is some *Hedychium corinarium* (white butterfly ginger), and there is some *Salvia rosmarinus* (rosemary) conveniently located to the back door and kitchen. There's another *Aesculus* (buckeye). Other plants include *Hamelia patens* (fire bush), *Indigofera* (Asian species indigo), *Amorpha fruticosa* (lead plant), *Eupatorium* (dwarf Joe-Pye weed), and *Lycoris* (red spider lily). In addition there is a *Capsicum annuum* (bird pepper)—planted by the birds all by themselves. Although the peppers are extremely hot; the mocking birds eat them like candy. I make a delicious pepper vinegar with them—with the peppers, not the birds. Oh yes, here, and just about everywhere in the garden has some *salvia coccinea* (tropical sage) which is just fine with me, the humming birds, and bees.

Making a turn by the bed behind the garage/workshop, heading toward the back North East corner of the property, we see *Salvia miniata* (smooth-leaf sage), *Itea Virginica* (Virginia sweet spire), and a stand of *Calycanthus floridus* (Carolina allspice), golden now in December. There is a compost area behind this bed. The path splits and heading right, toward the potting shed/propagation area, we are greeted a *Callicarpa Americana* (beauty berry) and more *Aesculus* (buckeye), *Tradescantia* (spiderwort), various ferns, and more smooth-leaf sage. Just left of the dog yard gate, there is a

huge, and I must say, vicious, *Rosa bracteata* (mermaid rose). (Mr. Bill described it as being capable of snatching young boys from their bicycles.) Also there is a *Rosa palustris* (swamp rose) that has been neglected. I actually gave it some fertilizer recently, but I guess my timing is a little off since it is winter.

When we take a left turn down the path, we come upon the cypress tree that has grown into its majesty. Underneath the cypress, catching some morning sun, there are some natives that haven't really flourished all that well: *Amsonia tabernaemontana* (blue star), *Silene subciliata* (Louisiana catch fly), and *Silene stellata* (widows frill) that hitched a ride with the catch fly. Maybe they need more sun or just more time to get established. Or, maybe they don't like the soil here which does tend toward the alkaline. (Lesson still being learned: Do research before planting.) The blue star is doing the best. Another native, *Spigelia marilandica* (Indian pink) is doing very well in the shade.

Other plants in the bed spreading under the reach of the cypress tree include natives and non-natives. There is a mix of vigorous *Iris ser Hexagone* (Louisiana iris) and *Neomarica northiana* (walking iris). An azalea is there, spreading toward the sun. *Agarista populifolia* (Florida leucothoe) is alive there, but not really thriving—one on the South side of the house is doing much better. There is a *Cyanococcus* (blueberry bush) that would love more sun, too, I'm sure. But that's where Greg put it; probably when the cypress was still a seedling. *Scutellaria* sp. (velvet skull cap) and *Tricertis 'Sinonome'* (toad lily), are happy there. A variety of "pass-a-long" plants are doing well: prayer plant, ajuga, and shrimp plant. A *Crustaegus marshallii* (parsley hawthorn), just planted about a year ago, is coming along. *Odontonema strictum* (firespike) is doing well in all the shaded places. *Amaryllis* thrived in the shade, too, until I accidentally dug them up and gave them all away.

The area to right of the path that runs just inside the back fence is very shaded by two mature magnolias in the corners of the neighbor's back yard. Nevertheless, it's an area also filled with plants: firespike, Carolina allspice, *Dryopteris* (woodfern), river oats, velvet skull cap, the Japanese magnolia, and a *Prunus caroliniana* (cherry laurel). Recently, I added a *Verbesina virginica* (frost weed) obtained from Acadiana Native Plant Project. (Every bare spot needs a plant, right?)

Moving on past the deep shade we come to the two raised brick planters that Mr. Bill called “pet beds.” Sun gets in there around midday for a little while. The pet beds have some herbs: edible ginger, parsley, bird peppers, cilantro, “cutting” celery, garlic chives, and mountain mint. Oregano is doing super there. We love us some fresh herbs.

The path dips down a little as it meanders to the left North corner of the garden. The American Hornbeam seedling has reached maturity and is almost as tall as the magnolia behind it. The witch hazel beside the hornbeam seems to struggle to get its share of sun. But it is managing. More understory plants are repeated in this bed. For the time being, we have another composting pile there as well. *Sambucus canadensis* (elderberry) keeps making its way onto the property, sneaking under the fence back here. I think I can finally agree with the position it has chosen. Maybe.

Recently, I was bedazzled to find a woodcock back there underneath the Hornbeam near the compost. I only had a brief view of the bird’s back as it was sitting motionless on the ground. I had been looking at mushrooms; so in my mind I was trying to make the unusual sight into another new mushroom. As I moved closer, the bird suddenly took flight. I had never seen anything like it. It took me a while to feel positive about the identification. But after some research and consultation with Mr. Bill, I am pretty certain that it was a woodcock. The memory of the distinctive pattern on its back of black, brown, and gray brings to mind a stained glass design. I will remember it forever! In the Navaho teachings: Walk in beauty: Beauty above, beauty below, beauty all around.

When looking to the left of the path, one is met with the wonder of the huge ginkgo tree Greg planted years ago. It is so beautiful—especially when it turns gold in the fall and its leaves overlay the ground. Although the ginkgo is not a native, a woodpecker has made row upon row of stash holes circling on up the tree. Since the ginkgo has provided beauty, shade, and food source for birds, I suppose we can welcome it to the New World. (What would Doug Tallamy say? I know: Plant an oak. Alas, there is not enough room for an oak in this small city garden.)

The constraints of reality bring to mind the story of the gracefully curved row of ginkgos that Greg planted as a Viet Nam Memorial along the back fence. Those trees were survivors in the shade. The horizontal limbs

stretched out long into the neighbor's yard, almost touching his house. Eventually, Greg took the limbs and intertwined them like arms holding on to one another, but they didn't want to do that. They grew taller. The ginkgo on the end got the most sun and its trunk grew bigger around and it reached about 15-20 feet tall. Well, I'm sure you know what had to be done. Greg had once worked for a tree service in his younger years—swinging from a rope with a chain saw. So I proceeded to help him take down the trees. Gone but not forgotten.

On the West side of the property, walking back toward the house there is more fire bush, river oats, begonias, beauty berry, and Abutilon (flowering maple). *Penstemon tenuis* (Gulf coast penstemon) is hither, thither, and yon. Beyond the wood fence gets full late afternoon sun, calling for a stand of plants that can take the heat. *Viburnum dentatum* (arrowwood) is doing very well there. *Dipcliptera suberector* (hummingbird plant) and *Lobelia laxiflora* (Mexican lobelia) are thriving as well. This past year I planted some *Sisyrinchium* (blue eyed grass) in this area. It seems to be ok with sun or shade. *Salvia lyrata* (lyreleaf sage) has spread here and everywhere in the garden; and it has made a small explosion in my neighbors yard. Lots of iris run a more or less straight row down the property line. Turk's caps are doing exceedingly well in the burning sun. Pineapple sage needs some pruning back. There is always maintenance calling—all the time and everywhere.

Putting chores aside, it's time to take a rest. We have made our way back to the patio. We can sit in the swing and observe the garden forest that has been growing for the past forty years. It is a living work of art and a meditation; a learning experience, exercise, and a food source. There is an abundance of nature to enjoy. I've heard that gardening is good for your health. Take a deep breath... relax. And, if you are really into it (and weather permits), lie down on the earth, on your back, with arms spread wide and feet apart. Breathing deeply...rest...take rest.

