

Calendar

We Need to Talk About Grass

Low-Income Landscaping

What makes a garden grow? A green thumb, some say. Greenbacks, say others. Bill Tall, owner of City Farmers Nursery, frequently hears a certain complaint: "I've got a brown thumb." But there's no such thing. When you have a problem in your garden, there's a logical reason why, and you can fix it."

If you have plenty of money to spend, your yard will look better than the yard of someone on a limited budget. That's logic, too, isn't it? "Not really," says Tall. "True, with a lot of money, you might put in a 15-foot palm tree. Without it, you'll put in a 2-foot one. But eventually they're

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going to be the same size, and you'll get more enjoyment from the younger one. It's like raising fancy goldfish. Most breeders won't buy something that's already beautiful. They look for one to watch as it matures, so they can see its beauty developing. Same with plant material."

Tree-growing would seem an ambitious pursuit for a limited-income gardener. But Tall points out that trees help cool a house and enhance its resale value. Plus, he knows ways for people to get free trees from the city. "There are programs, and we'll be talking about them."

Tall will share his knowledge during the two-part Landscaping 101 for low- and moderate-income homeowners. It's sponsored by the San Diego Neighborhood Housing Services and designed for its own loan recipients, but all are welcome to attend. Tall will talk about getting free compost at the landfill and how to incorporate kitchen scraps into the landscape properly. He'll answer questions about what to do about existing plant material on the property. And he'll continue to stress the benefits of small plantings. Something worth considering: "You don't have to dig as big a hole for a smaller plant."

His teaching partner is master garden Nancy Helt, who will discuss at this weekend's first session the preparations and planning that should precede the plant shopping. Helt wants to see pictures. Participants should

bring two types: before and after; reality and dream; "as is" and "hoped for." The former can be a snapshot, the latter from a magazine. Or both can be sketched. She needs to know the space's size, too. "If you don't have a tape measure, just step it off, heel-toe, heel-toe, across the yard."

Like Tall, Helt trumpets the advantages of trees. "Let's face it: trees make a neighborhood beautiful. So that's your first investment, because it's your centerpiece."

In choosing trees, one has to be

careful to avoid too much success.

Jacarandas, for example, have gorgeous purple blossoms but can become gigantic. "You can't plant a jacaranda in a small yard with a retaining wall, because it's going to break through that wall. You also have to realize the amount of 'drop' that comes from them — blossoms as well as tiny leaves." Helt suggests as an alternative what are called "polite patio trees" that "will behave" in smaller spaces. Examples of well-mannered trees are eucalyptus, purple plum, and crepe myrtle.

People should think about how the yard will be used. "If you have kids and want grass, we need to talk about grass." But grass costs time and money. "You have to feed it, mow it, water it. It takes more water than many kinds of plants do. And if you've got everybody in the household working jobs, you can't necessarily keep up with it. So if you don't need grass for kids to run and tumble, you might think about an alternative groundcover."

Groundcovers have their own pitfalls. Think about your tolerance for perfume and for insects, if you're choosing, say, jasmine. It gives off a lot of scent, attractive to bees. A better choice may be "the beautiful low-lying gazania," says Helt. Those come in "the warm Indian paint-brush colors — yellows, oranges, burnt-oranges — and have little stripes of black on them. They don't need much care, and will last for years."

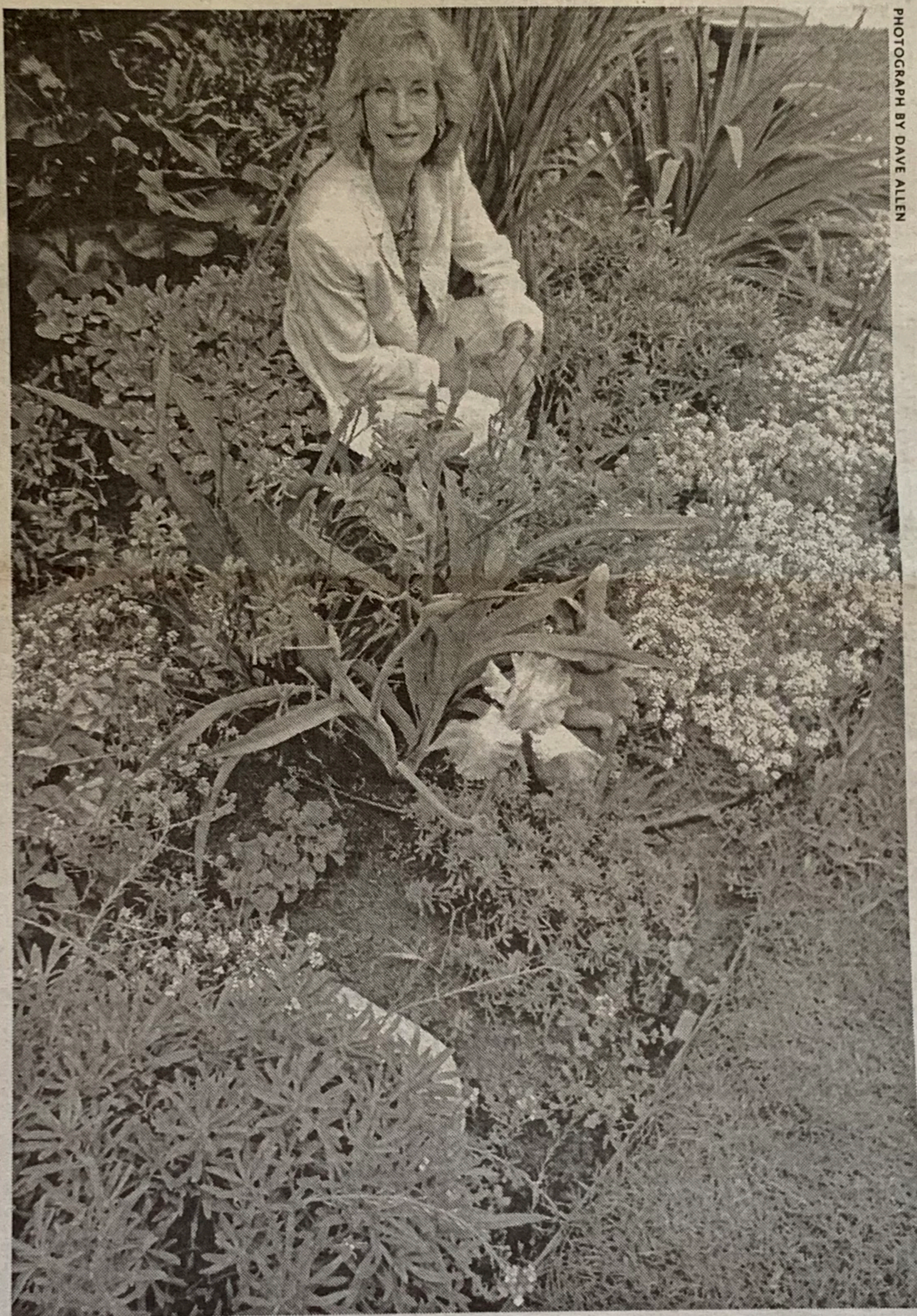
The acquisition of gardening tools may worry some first-time gardeners. Helt says all one really needs are pruning shears, a shovel, and a small hand-trowel.

Tall's list differs somewhat from Helt's, since his presentation on the second Saturday will stress soil preparation. "If you're just starting out and have got nothing going on, I think the four basic tools would be a pointed shovel, a pick, a wheelbarrow, and a rock rake, as opposed to a leaf rake."

He mentions swap meets and garage sales as good used-tool sources, where "people are trying to get rid of old tools left and right." The possibility of renting tools shouldn't be overlooked. Nor should be borrowing, gratis: "Start knocking on your neighbors' doors," says the affable Tall.

— Jeanne Schinto

Landscaping 101 for Low- and Moderate-Income Homeowners
Saturday, September 9 and September 16
10:00 a.m. to 12 noon
Nate's Deli at City Farmers,
3120 Euclid Avenue,
San Diego
Free (seating limited to 30)
Info and reservations:
619-229-2370



Nancy Helt in her home garden

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVE ALLEN

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