



Scotch Gardener Jim Kerr poses in the midst of his lush Aptos garden

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San Francisco garden columnist does his writing from Aptos

By MARY BARNETT

Jim Kerr, who is "The Scotch Gardener" in the daily San Francisco Chronicle column, finds Aptos an ideal place for Scotch gardening—or any other kind.

The garden columnist, and former radio and TV garden personality lives at the end of Pine Tree Lane next to New Brighton Beach State Park. His cottage is in the midst, naturally, of a garden bursting with flowers and fruit.

Kerr bought his Pine Tree Lane home three years ago and moved here from his former home in Redwood City. Smog now blankets that once salubrious city much of the time, and "you can't spray against smog, you know."

He thinks the Aptos site an ideal one because he will never be hemmed in by neighbors. On one side he has the state park, and on the other, the Southern Pacific right-of-way.

A freight train goes past his place morning and evening, to the delight of his nine grandchildren, who visit Kerr and his wife, Audrey, now and then.

All in all, it is a fine spot to be a Scotch gardener, turn out the daily Chronicle column, and pour over the thousands of letters he receives every year from all over the Bay Area, and even from as far away as Massachusetts.

Some times his mail runs as high as two or three thousand letters a month from gardeners seeking advice or anxious to share their garden discoveries with other green thumbs.

"I get such tremendous mail that I never search for topics," Kerr said in his engaging Scottish burr. "I always find one right in my mailbox."

There may be a letter from a woman who confides that she grows fine oranges and grapefruits in Belmont by feeding the citrus trees epsom salts.

(Kerr is now trying this on his front yard grapefruit tree, which, he says, produces abundant, beautiful, and inedible fruit.)

Or Kerr may hear from a woman who recommends feeding pumpkins intravenously. She has a fertilizer bottle tied to a post by the pumpkin vine, and she used a needle to shoot the nutrients right into the vein of her pumpkins.

And then there was the man who found out how to get rid of deer in his garden. He rigged up a camera to take a picture of the nightly garden raiders who were pestering him. When he

developed the roll he found two deer staring into the camera. They never came back, though—camera shy, you see.

It's all grist for Kerr's mill, and he loves to hear from gardeners anyway because "people who garden are very superior people. Always clean and above board—no dirt or filth, ever, in their letters."

This speaks well of the human race as a whole, because Kerr points out that gardening is the most popular of all hobbies not only in the United States but all over the world.

The Chronicle has a circulation of around half a million, and the management credits Kerr with having 20 per cent of the readership. That's 100,000 readers a day—a healthy number for any newspaper feature.

Kerr has only been a garden columnist for three or four years.

"I got into it because of a newspaper strike," he explained. "Four years ago when there was a newspaper strike, KQED (Channel 9) had a program from seven to eight, with all the striking newsmen sitting around discussing the day's news."

"Once a week I discussed gardening with them. When the strike was over, the editor of the Chronicle called up and asked me to do a column."

Kerr's column appears daily, Monday through Friday, in the women's section.

Informing people about gardens was nothing new to Kerr, however, when he became a Chronicle columnist. He was on television on Channel 9 for 11 years, in the oldest TV program in the state at the time. And he had a radio program for 15 years on KCBS.

For the sake of his health, he has given up all of his activities except "The Scotch Gardener" column in the Chronicle.

No armchair gardener, Kerr learned his field from the ground up. He served his apprenticeship in the seed business in his native Scotland. (He comes from Banff in northern Scotland.) When he came to California in 1930, he worked in the seed fields 15 years, and then drifted into the retail seed business in San Mateo, handling seeds, fungicides, insecticides, and fertilizers.

Scotland is a land of gardeners, Kerr said, adding, "Everybody gardens. If half of them didn't garden, they'd starve."

Kerr has one favorite word of advice for green-thumbs who wish to improve their gardens—"Patience!"

Standing on the deck of his home, which overlooks his garden, he pointed to a spectacular purple princess flower.

"It wasn't doing too well at first and my wife thought it ought to come out," he said. "But I told her, let's be patient! Patience is more important than fertilizer, in gardening. Plants are like youngsters—you have to give them time to develop."

For the homeowner who wants an easy-to-care-for garden, Kerr unhesitatingly recommends California native plants. He has started quite a number of them in his own garden, including the yellow-flowering fremontia and the blue-flowering ceanothus (wild lilac).

"I like natives very, very much," he said. "They are easy to grow, they have fewer insects and diseases than most other plants, and they are very, very pretty."

He thinks the only reason people don't grow more natives is that they don't know more about them. They are hard to find in nurseries—no nursery in the Bay Area specializes in them.

Home food gardens, Kerr thinks, are very worthwhile for those who have room for them, especially at this time of year, when perennial vegetables are coming on.

"Fruit and vegetable costs are going up, and more machines are being used. Machines always harvest the produce before it is ripe, and you don't get the flavor," he said. "With just a half-dozen tomato plants you can have plenty of tomatoes—and so much more flavor."

But there is no doubt vegetable gardening is work. As Kerr says, "You have to enjoy it."

Most gardeners think of flowers when they plan what to plant. And when it comes to that, Kerr avers, "Begonias, fuchsias and camellias are THE flowers in this county."

"They like the coolness, and the moisture in the atmosphere, and they aren't much work, once they get established. The most important thing is patience. Let them come along slowly!"

advised the Scotch Gardener.

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