

PLANTS

How one woman is doggedly transforming an L.A. trash patch into a vibrant habitat garden



Environmental scientist Marie Massa has spent three years transforming a long, weedy strip of trash-filled public land into a fragrant native plant garden on Avenue 20, which she's named the Lincoln Heights California Native Plants Corridor. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

By Jeanette Marantos
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- Marie Massa noticed a neglected strip of public land near her son's school in 2022.
- The narrow strip in Lincoln Heights next to the 5 Freeway was filled with weeds and trash, but Massa saw a few native buckwheats trying to grow and thought, "Native plants could do really well here."

- Today Massa spends three mornings a week tending the vibrant, flower-filled native habitat garden she created mostly by herself and named the Lincoln Heights California Native Plants Corridor.

Some people see trash and weeds and walk on by. Others rail against the slobs of the world, or agencies that don't do their jobs.

And some, like environmental scientist Marie Massa, roll up their sleeves and get to work.

In Massa's case, that's meant spending six to nine hours a week since early 2023 working mostly alone to transform a long, trash-filled strip of no-man's land between Avenue 20 and Interstate 5 in Lincoln Heights into a fragrant, colorful habitat of California native plants.



Tall stems of rosy clarkia, a native wildflower, add to the riot of spring color in the Lincoln Heights California Native Plants Corridor on Avenue 20, south of Broadway. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

She's named the garden the Lincoln Heights California Native Plants Corridor and features it on her Instagram page, [ave2onativeplants](#), exulting every time she spots a native bee, caterpillar or some other creature visiting the space for food or shelter.

"You see all these horrible things happening in the world," she said, "the loss of rainforests, of plants and animals and insects. ... It's so much and sometimes I can't handle all this bad news," Massa said. "That's why I feel compelled, because I can make a difference here."

Planting Change

With little fanfare, Southern Californians are quietly changing urban landscapes for the better with native plants. These are their stories.

Massa is slender and just 5 feet tall in her work boots, with strands of gray lightening her dark hair. Years ago, she helped build the [Nature Gardens at the Los Angeles County Natural History Museum](#). She wrote about wildflower blooms for the [Theodore Payne Foundation's Wild Flower Hotline](#) and volunteered to help renovate UCLA's extraordinary [Mathias Botanical Garden](#), a project that was completed in 2024.

These days Massa is a stay-at-home mom to Caleb, age 8. Her husband, Joseph Prichard, one-time lead singer for the L.A. punk band [One Man Show Live](#), now runs his own graphic design company, [Kilter](#). Most weekdays, Massa walks her son to and from school, makes her husband's lunch and tends her own private garden.



Marie Massa purchased 200 feet of hose so she could hook it up to a spigot at the neighboring Alliance Susan & Eric Smidt Technology High School, which has given her permission to use the water to keep her native plant garden project alive. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

But Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays between 8:30 and 11:30 a.m., Massa becomes a determined eco-warrior. With her garden gloves, buckets, hand tools and a spongy cushion to protect her knees as she weeds, Massa is doggedly transforming a

strip of public land roughly 8 feet wide and around 380 feet long — longer than a football field.



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She fills bags of trash from around her planting strip and calls 311 to have them hauled away. She drags 200 feet of hose to water her new plantings a few times a month, from a spigot made available by Alliance Susan & Eric Smidt Technology High School next door. She's spent days digging up garbage buried three feet deep in the garden and even muscled an old oven from the planting area to the curb after someone dumped it during the night.

When graffiti appears on the retaining wall below the freeway, she takes a photo and uploads it to [MyLA311](#) to get it painted over. She's lobbied for plant donations, potted up excess seedlings for people to carry home and recruited work parties for really big jobs, such as sheet mulching the parkway between the sidewalk and the street to keep weed seeds from blowing into the habitat corridor on the other side of the sidewalk.

The project started slowly in the fall of 2022. As she walked Caleb to school, less than a mile from their Lincoln Heights home, Massa noticed this long strip of neglected land between the freeway's retaining wall and the sidewalk.



Passerby Eimy Valle, 20, walks amid the abundant spring color of the Lincoln Heights California Native Plants Corridor on Avenue 20. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

“It was full of weedy dried grasses, all kind of brown, and lots of trash,” Massa said.
“There were also four planter beds in the parkway [the strip of land between the

sidewalk and street] with a few buckwheat and encelias (brittlebush), but every time the L.A. Conservation Corps came to mow the weeds down, they gave a huge horrible buzz cut to the native plants.”

When the buckwheats in the parkway got mowed down, she said, they blew seeds into the wider planting strip on the other side of the sidewalk, and Massa said she noticed some buckwheat seedlings coming up, trying to make space for themselves among the weeds. “I thought, ‘Native plants could do really well here,’ and I started developing this idea that the strip would be cool as a native plant garden.”

That November, she bought some wildflower seeds and sprinkled them along the corridor, to see whether the soil would support their growth. After the heavy rains that winter, she was delighted to find them sprouting in the spring, fighting through the weeds along with buckwheat seedlings.



Clusters of deep blue California bluebells are among the many vibrant flowers blooming at the Lincoln Heights California Native Plants Corridor on Avenue 20.
(Christina House / Los Angeles Times)



Native sticky monkey-flowers come in two colors at the Lincoln Heights California Native Plants Corridor: in red and here, in pale yellow with white edges. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

She wrote a letter to people who lived near the untended land, outlining her idea to create a native plant garden to beautify the area and support pollinators. She invited neighbors to help her and included her email address. “I didn’t get any responses,” she said, “but when I went out to weed, people would come up to me and say, ‘We got your letter and this is a cool idea.’”

In the spring of 2023, as her wildflowers were sprouting, Massa called the office of [Los Angeles Council District 1](#) and told them about her project. She asked them to stop the Conservation Corps from mowing down the emerging plants and requested help from the Conservation Corps to suppress the weeds along the long strip of parkway between the sidewalk and street.

The council agreed, so between May and October of 2023, Massa organized six work sessions to sheet mulch the parkway between the sidewalk and street, laying down cardboard and city-provided mulch with help from members of the [L.A. Conservation Corps](#), [Plant Community](#) and [Audubon Society](#). The goal was to suppress the weeds on the parkway so they didn’t add more seeds to the habitat she was trying to create on the other side of the sidewalk.



LIFESTYLE

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“The sheet mulching took a looong time,” she said, “but I wanted the parkway to look nice, with cleaned up planters, so people could park along the street, easily get out of

their cars and see the corridor.”

But she still needed plants. She went to her former boss at the Natural History Museum’s Nature Gardens, native plant guru [Carol Bornstein](#), with her design, and Bornstein helped her choose colorful, fragrant and resilient native shrubs, perennials and annuals that could provide habitat for insects, birds and other wildlife.

The response to her plant quest was heartening. The [Los Angeles-Santa Monica Mountains Chapter of the California Native Plant Society](#) gave her a \$500 grant, and several nonprofit and for-profit nurseries donated plants, including the [Audubon Center at Debs Park](#), [Theodore Payne Foundation](#), [Santa Monica Mountains Fund native plant nursery](#), [TreePeople](#), [Descanso Gardens](#), [Plant Material](#), [Hardy Californians](#), [Artemisia Nursery](#) and [Growing Works Nursery](#), which even delivered the large cache of plants from its nursery in Camarillo to Lincoln Heights.

By November she had more than 400 plants, and the help of a friend, Lowell Abellon, who wanted to learn more about native plants. Working about six hours a week, they slowly began adding plants to the 380-foot strip, weeding around each addition as they went. By March they had added about half the plants, but they had to stop before it got too warm.

“If you plant them too late, they don’t have time to get good roots down into the ground [before it gets too hot],” she said. “I tried to be on top of the watering, but during the summer about half of them died, so I had to do a lot of replacement planting in the fall.”

During the summer, Massa mostly worked alone keeping the newly planted sections of the corridor weeded and watered. Because school was out, she brought her young son to help her each week. Sometimes neighbors with children would join them, she said, giving her son someone to play with, but once or twice, she resorted to offering him \$5 for his weeding work.

When school resumed in the fall, Massa was ready to start planting again, this time working mostly alone because her friend Abellon had a family emergency that took him out of state. She began in October, planting and weeding the rest of the corridor, including adding 100 plants to replace the ones that died.



The native plant corridor on Avenue 20 has many clumps of showy penstemon, native perennials that live up to their name with their deep-throated, vibrantly colored flowers in electric purple and pink. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

Now, in the garden's third spring, the plants are filling out. There are large mounds of California buckwheat, tall spires of sweet hummingbird sage and incandescently purple clusters of showy penstemon. Monkey flowers in orange and red, scarlet bugler, purple and white sages and coffeeberry shrubs are coming into their own. And there's so much California buckwheat Massa has had to thin out some of the plants and put them in pots for others to take home.

She hopes her work will inspire others to create their own native plant gardens and even tackle a project like hers, beautifying a neglected public space. But she says it's

important that people understand such work is more than a passion; it's a long-term commitment.

Guerrilla gardeners have great intentions, she said, but it usually takes at least three years for a garden of native plants to get established, and those young plants will need water, whether it's a nearby water spigot or jerricans of water lugged to the site.

"If you just plant and go, you might as well throw the plants in a trash can, because it's not going to work," Massa said. "If you don't water them, if you don't weed and pick up trash, people aren't going to respect the space, especially if you don't put in the effort to keep it looking good. For a garden to be successful, you have to commit to putting in the work."

Massa's son goes to another school these days, but she figures she'll keep up her three-mornings-a-week schedule at the garden for at least another year, until she's confident the plants are established enough to thrive on their own. For instance, she wants to make sure the narrow leaf milkweed she planted gets big enough to attract endangered monarch butterflies and provide a place for them to lay their eggs and plenty of food for their caterpillars every year.

"My hope is that this will become a habitat that's self-sustaining," she said, "so I can step away and be OK just picking up trash every once in a while."



Marie Massa is nearly dwarfed by the tallest plants in her Lincoln Heights California Native Plants Corridor. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

Will she start another project somewhere else? Massa rolled her eyes.

“My husband says I can’t take on another project until this one is done, and this one has been a lot of work,” she said, laughing, “buuuut I *do* actually have my eye on another spot.”

And then suddenly she's serious, talking about this weedy strip on Main Street, not far from where she's working now. She's a little embarrassed, struggling to explain why she would want to tackle another lonely, thankless project, but defiant too, because, clearly, this is a mission.

"People in this neighborhood don't seem to know about native plants," she said, "so maybe I can show them their value, the value of having habitat and space around you that's beautiful. Maybe it could be a way of educating a new audience about the value of appreciating the environment."

Maybe so. Better watch your back, Johnny Appleseed.

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