



“I see it ecologically, like it’s an ecological network that we’re around. If the earth around you isn’t healthy then it’s hard to plant a tree. I think seven generations forward. How are my daughters and my daughters’ children going to deal with this neighborhood that I see here? How can I do the best that I can to not make it unlivable?”

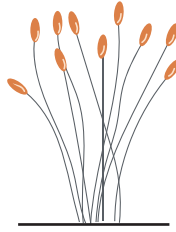
BEN CALDWELL

Leimert Park arts educator, independent filmmaker, and visionary.

Interview with author for “AfroLAnews,” 2024



INTRODUCTION



HOW DO WE TAKE ROOT IN A CORNER OF THE WORLD? How do we find our place and positively integrate in a country and on a planet coming apart at the seams?

As a journalist for nearly 40 years now, it's been my job to ask questions. But these questions have been front and center since my husband and I moved to Leimert Park in South Los Angeles several years ago.

I'm a white woman married to a Black man who was born and raised in South L.A. Gregory's parents bought their first home near Leimert Park in the 1950's, after they were denied a home loan in a white Orange County neighborhood—even though the U.S. Supreme Court had struck down restrictive racial covenants in property deeds in 1948.

Back then, even Leimert Park was out of reach. It was a planned community with racial covenants when it was built in 1927, boasting detached single-family homes and duplexes that are still well-kept. The community remained a mostly white enclave until the 1960s, when white flight after the Watts Riots created space for Black home-ownership and flourishing art, music, and culture.

To this day, Leimert Park is known as the “cultural heartbeat of Black L.A.”

Pride of place extends to people's yards. Almost every property has lush green and perfectly manicured lawns. It is not an overstatement to say homeowners here are very attached to their grass.

“Monument of Love: Mother + Child” mural on The Good Shepherd Manor by El Mac (elmac.net / [@mac_arte](https://www.instagram.com/mac_arte)) for [@destinationcrenshaw](https://www.instagram.com/destinationcrenshaw). Photo: MBS

I grew up loving grass, too. It helped create an oasis of green in the Sonoran desert landscape I was born into. To this day, the Phoenix home my 94-year-old father still lives in has the lushest lawn in the neighborhood.

But, having spent most of my career focused on environmental issues like climate change, my affections have shifted. I'm now more attracted to vegetation that's native to a place which, in L.A., means mostly drought-tolerant and most definitely does *not* mean turf. So, when Gregory and I moved into our duplex, with its 1,200-square-foot carpet of thirsty Fescue Bluegrass Blend front and back, I felt at odds with my surroundings—both culturally and agriculturally.

In fall 2023, the Los Angeles Neighborhood Council Sustainability Alliance (LANCSA) sponsored a pilot project to replace one lucky homeowner's lawn with 100% Southern California native plants. I saw a chance to transform our corner of the world, so I entered LANCSA's essay contest.

I'd never grown anything or kept anything alive save a few succulents. But I won the essay contest and in March 2024, more than 100 volunteers from all over L.A. and from organizations including LANCSA, The Climate Reality Project, Surfrider Foundation, Chaminade College Prep School, Selva EcoGardens, and Empowerment Congress West Area descended on our yard, ripped out the turf, put down a butcher-paper weed barrier and then a layer of mulch, and planted more than 150 donated natives.

We loved our mulchy unlovely native-garden-in-the-making. Others did not, including our neighbor. He gardens. We share a backyard wall and have the good fortune of being able to enjoy his roses and the delicate pink blossoms on his trellis vines. We have friendly relations and I enjoy the way he always greets me with, "How you do?" We'd warned him early on about our plans to go native. His smiling response? "Oh, *hell*, no!" When the project was imminent we had a proper conversation. I asked him why he didn't like native gardens.

"I think they're ridiculous," he said. "A nice well-kept lawn, especially in a neighborhood full of that, it just looks nice," he added.

* * *



"Dwell + Well + Being," by MBS. The quote is by French philosopher Gaston Bachelard: "How do we take root in a corner of the world? For our house is a corner of the world; it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word. If we look at it intimately, the humblest dwelling has beauty." Yards, too.

When I'm with my family I move with ease in the proudly Black enclave of Leimert Park (73% Black in a city that is 8% Black). When I'm solo, in my self-conscious mind—and probably in others' minds, too—I'm a gentrifier.

Gentrification is no joke, though a December 2023 *LA Times* article meant to frame it that way. According to its author, here's how to spot a gentrifying neighborhood: In addition to those miniature free libraries that look like bird houses, other tells include fresh black and white paint jobs (flippers love this impersonal scheme) and drought-tolerant gardens.

I didn't find the article funny at all. Gentrification almost always leads to rising rents and home prices, which in turn results in displacement. Also, I'm directly

implicated — both culturally and agriculturally. The very effort I'd undertaken to cultivate a yard more in tune with the natural environment landed me with a double thud on the gentrification map — and way out of tune with the long-time residents like our neighbor.

I've spent many hours contemplating these things as I weed, water, and watch the goings-on in our garden and beyond. I've also thought a lot about what it means to belong to and have responsibilities for the welfare of a place; to dwell well in a neighborhood, a community, and on the planet; to make a habit of seeing the world from a different cultural perspective so that it becomes second nature.

As I write this, Los Angeles is burning. A morally bankrupt carnival barker is president. Everything everywhere all at once is coming apart, turning to ashes.

Our garden is not an escape from all the grief and cruelties of this world. Perhaps, maybe a little. But more, it's a living laboratory that offers another perspective. It's an indigenous plant environment that smells of sage and rain and is attuned to its corner of the world, which is semi-arid and interconnected with the more-than-human life that has evolved to thrive here. It's an environment that promotes tranquility and is unmanicured in its beauty. It's a natural environment that does not need or take too much. And it's an environment that provides habitat for monarch butterflies and Black Phoebes and all kinds of diverse living things whose existence is mutually beneficial.

I sit quietly on the backyard stump made from our Catalpa tree, within reach of a Fragrant Pitcher Sage and a Bee Plant. Western Honey Bees buzz about, ignor-



ing me. An Anna's hummingbird takes time from its flower-hopping escapades and tugs spider silk from a Western Orbweaver's web for its nest. Everything is astonishing, brimming with life that yearns for itself.

What follows is a set of practical native garden notes and some very personal impressions about cultivating sanctuary, solidarity, and a common sense of interconnectedness — whether in a garden or in a community. Any insights you may find useful here spring from nothing more complicated than digging in the soil and respectfully paying attention.

Marilyn Berlin Snell
Winter/Spring 2025



A Fragrant Pitcher Sage offers shade
and earthy good scents for stump sitting.