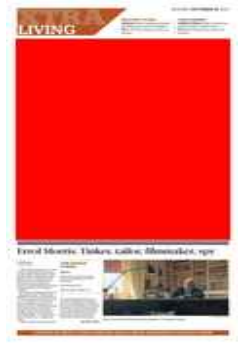


'They've never seen anything like this'

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Stephen Reid holds passion fruit he harvested from the yard he transformed into a native and drought tolerant habitat with organically grown vegetables at his home on Aug. 29 in Watts, California. DANIA MAXWELL TNS



Calendula oil from Stephen Reid's yard is seen on Aug. 29 in Watts, California. Reid is an assistant gardener and curator of the rose garden at The Huntington Library. DANIA MAXWELL TNS

'They've never seen anything like this'

Their DIY garden is inspiring the block

BY JEANETTE MARANTOS
Los Angeles Times

LOS ANGELES

Even in his early years, Stephen Reid knew he was destined to work and inspire with plants.

Today, Reid, 35, is the assistant curator and head gardener of the rose garden at the Huntington Library, Art Gallery and Botanical Gardens, a

job he achieved after years of DIY studies, garden volunteer work and multiple plant and gardening certifications.

He's earned certificates as an organic gardener through Grow L.A. Gardens courses, a UC Cooperative Extension master gardener and a California native plant landscaper, skills he's honed outside the fixer-upper home he and his wife Ashley bought in Watts.

SEE DIY, PAGE 2



FROM PAGE 1

DIY

Together they dug out the weedy 940-square-foot front lawn and parkway by themselves, shoveled in mountains of composted horse manure and wood-chip mulch and relandscaped - twice! - with drought-tolerant and native plants, herbs, vegetables and a passion fruit vine so massive and productive that it supplies half the neighborhood with fruit.

They also rebuilt their DJ business For the Culture Sound in L.A., and started a family: Their daughter, Phoenix, was born July 29, just four months after Reid started his new job at the Huntington. It's a busy life - "We learned to live with two to three hours of sleep" - but Reid said he feels "kind of blessed every day."

The Huntington typically hires people with botanical degrees, he said, "but I took an alternate route with lots of certifications and it worked for me. It was kind of an intersection of luck, hard work and passion."

Reid was born in Toronto to a mother from Trinidad & Tobago and a father from Barbados. They separated when he was 5, and he moved back and forth between their homes in Toronto and Alabama.

Plants were never a priority in either household. His parents believed "if I wasn't a doctor or a lawyer, I would be a failure," he said, "but growing up, my mom affectionately called me 'Dirt' because I was always trailing dirt into the house. I loved to carry around plants and bugs, and have my feet in the dirt."

He left college in Florida before finishing his degree to help a friend develop a clothing line in Los Angeles. That led to advertising work in New York, where he met and



DANIA MAXWELL TNS

Stephen, Ashley and their newborn Phoenix Reid pose for a portrait in the garden they transformed into a native and drought tolerant habitat with organically grown vegetables, on Aug. 29 in Watts, California.

married Ashley, a Brooklyn native and partner in their new DJ business. Things were going well personally and professionally, but something was missing.

"The corporate advertising world was where I was making my money," he said, "but I remember taking extended lunch breaks near a river park and laying in the grass just trying to see how things grow. That underlying resonance (for plants) was

there; I just wasn't sure how to explore it."

Eventually, the couple left their day jobs to run the DJ business full-time. But Reid kept coming back to plants. His frequent visits to the Brooklyn Botanic Garden turned into volunteer sessions there. He joined the Brooklyn Urban Gardeners training program for fledgling gardeners and started a guerrilla garden of herbs and lettuce in old cinder blocks behind his

apartment. When COVID shut down their DJ work in 2020, he became a paid apprentice at Flower Power Herbs, a popular herb shop in Manhattan's East Village.

About two-thirds of the way through his 1,000-hour herbalist training, Stephen and Ashley decided they were done with New York: "We were craving sun and space to get out in nature without a two-hour train ride."

So in early 2021 they



DANIA MAXWELL TNS

Herbs grow in Stephen Reid's front yard where he used the LADWP turf replacement program to transform it into a native and drought tolerant habitat with organically grown vegetables, at his home on Aug. 29 in Watts, California.

began a long-distance house hunt. They found a 956-square-foot fixer-upper in Watts with a small, patchy lawn in the front yard and a big backyard covered with concrete. Reid finished his apprenticeship and earned his herbalist certificate the same month they left New York.

They used an FHA program that allowed just a 5% down payment, and felt lucky to get the house after the first and second buyers had to drop out.

Their first priority was making their new house habitable. That took about six months on a shoestring budget.

Then Reid turned his attention to the yard. He pursued a rumor he'd heard about the Los Angeles Department of Water & Power's turf replacement program, which then paid residents \$3 a square foot (it's \$5 per square foot now) to tear out their lawns and relandscape with drought-tolerant plants, mulch and a rain-capturing feature like a bioswale or rain barrel.

Before he applied, he signed up for several weeks of LADWP's free Landscape Training Classes to learn how to submit a successful application as well as the basics of rain-water harvesting, efficient

irrigation, landscaping with native plants and garden design. Thus armed, he used his Adobe Illustrator skills from his advertising days to put together a small map of his yard and a landscape plan. His application was approved.

That's when the real work began, he said. He and Ashley rented a sod-cutting machine to cut out their old lawn in long, heavy strips. The city had stopped delivering mulch during the pandemic, so they found a source on Craigslist (Joel Griffith of the Imperial Equestrian Center in South Gate) selling bulk composted horse manure, wood-chip mulch and soil.

Griffith delivered the amendments in towering hills in the road next to their home. They got to work immediately, because they had a deadline: "I had to get it off the street so people could park the next day," he said. "We bought a lot of pizza and beer and invited all our friends to help," he said. They laid painters paper over the old lawn to smother any remaining weeds, then covered the

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