

# LOS ALTOS

# Hills

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RESIDENT **FEATURE**

# *Kit Gordon's Native Habitat*

By Abbie Burgess



A TREEHOUSE ON  
KIT GORDON'S PROPERTY.  
**PHOTO BY**  
**ANNA DOBRENSKI PHOTO**



**W**hen Kit Gordon and her husband moved to Los Altos Hills in 1995, she admits she knew very little about plants. While working in the yard, she noticed a wonderful fragrance from a small vine-type plant and asked a neighbor about it. The neighbor's two-word response forever changed Gordon's perspective on landscaping: native plant. She says that this was a new concept to her that the land – the soil, climate, elevation – grew plants that had evolved specifically for this location and that the birds and butterflies depended on those plants. Landscape options from her Illinois upbringing consisted of corn fields, expansive lawns and vegetable gardens. Most of Gordon's steep Los Altos Hills property had never been landscaped and was full of native plants, but also quite a few invasive pest plants as well. "I felt an obligation to maintain this habitat for the multitude of species that have lived here for thousands of years. Each year I remove invasive pest plants while mother nature replaces them with native plants," Gordon says. "The plant with the wonderful fragrance, *Clinopodium douglasii*, commonly called yerba buena, is still my favorite plant."

Today, Gordon's native landscape garden is a picturesque oasis, but that was far from the case when she first moved to Los Altos Hills. "Consuming the largest flat area of our property was a crumbling asphalt tennis court surrounded by a tall, ugly chain-link fence," she says. "I asked our longtime-resident neighbors what was here before our property was developed in the 1970s. 'A meadow,' was their response and this concept became my goal."

One of the benefits of native landscapes is low water usage, Gordon explains. "The early drought years inspired me into water conservation activism." For more than a decade she has volunteered with GreenTown Los Altos, Santa Clara Valley Water District, Sierra Club, Silicon Valley Water Conservation Awards

Committee, Permanente Reimagined and Committee for Green Foothills. In Los Altos Hills she has served on a variety of committees including Parks & Recreation, Water Conservation, Environmental Initiatives, and Open Space.

#### **Water conservation activism**

"There is a saying that you protect what you love, you love what you understand and you understand what you are taught. Most of my volunteer projects involve researching issues and educating the community," Gordon says. "I am especially driven to improve habitat for threatened steelhead trout in the Stevens – Permanente Watershed including on the Lehigh Quarry property." To that end, she is also working toward a county-wide program with the Santa Clara Valley Water District to eradicate invasive *Arundo donax*, commonly called giant reed. "This plant clogs our creeks, robs them of water and habitat, causes flooding when large segments break off and it is highly flammable," she says. Recently, she organized an effort to install signage for the 13 named creeks in Los Altos Hills.

Gordon is also proud to serve as a board member of Grassroots Ecology, a non-profit organization that restores local ecosystems and improves creek habitats at 25 sites in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties. Grassroots Ecology engaged over 10,000 local youth in ecological restoration and education in 2017. She co-hosts the quarterly South Bay/Peninsula Watershed Forums. "Through my volunteer work I've continued to learn about the interconnectedness of watershed management – land use, creek protection, groundwater management and the economy that depends on our natural resources." One of her favorite activities is monthly water quality monitoring of local creeks including Permanente, Adobe, Barron and Matadero. "If we take care of nature, nature will take care of us with clean water, clean air, healthy food and a safe place to live."

Continued >>>



### Family and education

Gordon has a familial connection to water conservation. “I first learned the term aquifer from my grandfather, an agricultural engineer that worked for the State Department,” she says. “In his retirement years in Illinois, he advocated for better groundwater management of the Ogallala aquifer – the groundwater basin beneath the Great Plains.”

At the University of Illinois, Gordon was inspired to become an engineer herself. She majored in Chemical Engineering and applied her knowledge in the semiconductor industry by moving to Silicon Valley and working for Monolithic Memories. Her education continued in the Bay Area with a master’s degree in Electrical Engineering and Master of Business Administration from Santa Clara University. In her career, she helped start QuickLogic and was awarded patents on amorphous silicon anti-fuse devices. Two recent accomplishments include being featured in the book “Women and Ideas in Engineering: Twelve Stories from Illinois” and delivering the commencement speech at University of Illinois School of Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering. She is continuing her own education in the fields of geology and watershed engineering through a variety of resources including Stanford University.

Through work Gordon met her husband, Tony Alvarez. After the birth of daughter Isabel in 2002, Gordon started experimenting with natural skin care products. “As a chemist I was concerned about drugstore products in our home and on our new baby’s skin,” she says. Teaming up with her yoga partner and friend, Nancy Newsom, the pair launched an organic natural skin care company, Botanic Organic, which can be purchased online and at the store Present in Los Altos.

Isabel’s birth also persuaded Gordon’s mother to move from Illinois to The Forum in Cupertino. “She grew up on a farm in Argyle, Illinois, a Scottish farming community,” Gordon says. “The Great Depression taught her lessons on hard work and frugality, lessons she’s passed on to me. My father was disabled soon after I was born. Hardships strengthen one’s resolve and clarify priorities.”

### At home in Los Altos Hills

“Music has been a constant element in our home,” Gordon says—

she herself plays flamenco guitar, Isabel plays piano and harpsichord and Tony plays the stereo – mostly music from his native country, Cuba. “Music and nature are interconnected as skillfully described in Bernie Krause’s book, *The Great Animal Orchestra*.”

The family shares their house with two cats. “Our daughter wanted to name her new kitten ‘Fire’ but realized she would create panic if the cat got outside and she ran around calling, ‘Fire.’” Wisely, she chose a different name for her cat.

“Tony, Isabel and I love to cook and the best way to make a great meal is with great ingredients. We are very fortunate to live near Hidden Villa. “The quality of their fresh flowers, eggs, sustainably grown produce and humanely raised meats is beyond compare,” she says, adding that she appreciates Hidden Villa’s regenerative agricultural practices that build soil health and lower greenhouse gas emissions. “For seafood and mushrooms, we subscribe to Ocean2Table which has a pick-up site in Los Altos Hills.”

Fox resting on my back porch. Photo provided by Kit Gordon.



Students from Bullis Charter School form a bucket brigade to care for their new plantings in Byrne Preserve on a field trip with Grassroots Ecology. Photo by Kristen Williams.



Gordon believes that one of the benefits of living in Los Altos Hills is the abundance of nature throughout town and the miles of pathways. "We love our neighborhood--bounded by Hidden Villa, Foothills Park and Byrne Preserve." She does admit that living on a half-mile private road built on a steep hillside has its maintenance challenges. "When I first moved to our neighborhood I noticed a tall man in a full rain suit

walking our base-rock road during a rainstorm with a shovel in hand. Crazy, I thought. Now I'm the one in the full rain suit walking the road with a shovel during the storms."

Gordon says it's fortunate that two United States Geological Survey (USGS) geologists have lived nearby and taught her about drainage, land management and slope density. While working for USGS, neighbor Art Lachenbruch wrote the slope density equation for determining minimum lot size for hillside communities. Another neighbor and USGS geologist, Hill Reiser, had a wealth of information on creeks, drainage and geology, Gordon says. "He also explained how regulatory agencies (US Army Corp of Engineers, CA Department of Fish and Wildlife and SF Regional Water Quality Control Board) collaborate to protect our creeks."

During one of our storm walks, I asked him about a tree precariously perched above the road. "Should we remove it before it falls and blocks the road?"

"No," he said. "The roots are holding up the soil and there is no need to create controversy - no one will disagree about the course of action once it has fallen." Twenty years later the tree is still in place holding up the hillside. "Mother nature is not only the best landscaper," Gordon says, "she's also the best geotechnical engineer."

Gordon's property has come a long way since she first learned about her first native plant. Today she says the property is home to hundreds of native plant species with accompanying fauna. "From butterflies to mountain lions, we welcome them all."

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