

# Hoiyin Ip: A Watershed-, Butterfly-and Bird-Friendly Garden



One of the many things I love about South Coast Water District is its watershed-friendly and butterfly-friendly native garden on the hillside, with an ocean view. I'm now learning landscaping from its designer, [Jodie Cook](#), a Sustainable SITES designer. Jodie is a tree hugger. From the roots to the clouds, from the plant next her to the edge of the watershed, she answers every question with plain common sense and vivid body language. The only way I could absorb such rich info is to keep the conversation going, with everyone. I hope you find our conversation helpful for your garden.

## HOIYIN IP: What is a watershed-friendly garden?

**JODIE COOK:** A watershed-friendly garden is designed to mimic natural processes to allow your garden to be beautiful, plants and wildlife to thrive while protecting the downstream waters from pollution.

## HI: You said let the garden feeds itself. How?

**JC:** Plants have the ability to feed themselves by photosynthesizing sun energy, and **they** build the soil conditions they prefer—if we allow them. When we blow the leaves away from under a tree, we remove a life-enhancing connection between the plant and soil. They are called leaves, because we should “leave” them! When organic matter, such as old leaves, falls to the ground, the microbiology in the soil essentially eats it, and in the process, releases nutrients the plant needs.

If you buy plants that evolved in a different climate or weather pattern from ours, **often** you must modify your soil and apply water to suit them. When we alter the soil with chemical fertilizers, use excessive high-pressure irrigation, compact the soil with machinery, or spray plants and soil with fungicides, herbicides or other pesticides, we often inadvertently inhibit the plant's ability to feed itself and pollute the watershed with urban runoff.

Birds and beneficial insects are the best “organic” pest control for your garden. Almost all bird species feed their young only with insects at this time of year, when they are nesting. Baby birds don’t eat bird seed. They prefer caterpillars and other high-protein bugs—the very insects we often apply pesticides to! They won’t take all the caterpillars, though. You’ll still have beautiful butterflies.

**HI: I’d love to see more native gardens in our neighborhoods and public areas. They’re lovely, with so many colors, textures and butterflies. But it seems to be more work to build such a garden than “grass or succulents.” What are your suggestions to get a native garden neighborhood started?**

**JC:** First, look for plants that have adapted over millennia to our specific summer-dry/winter-wet climate. Second, plant a native garden **just** before the rainy season. Then the rains will establish the garden for you. If you gently dig soil contours to infiltrate rain into your soil or re-direct roof water to swales and rain gardens, even a low rain year will be a good one for your plants.

You can start from there. When one neighbor changes and beautifies the garden, within one year another neighbor will follow; within five years, 2 or more neighbors will follow. You can be the beginning of a watershed-friendly neighborhood that is filled with colorful native plants, butterflies and birds.

*Hoiyin Ip is often recognized on the street as the plastic lady for her cleanup work. But she likes to think of herself as a guardian of the ocean. She is often reminded of a quote by former California Coastal Commission Executive Director Peter Douglas: “The coast is never saved. It’s always being saved.”*