

# SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

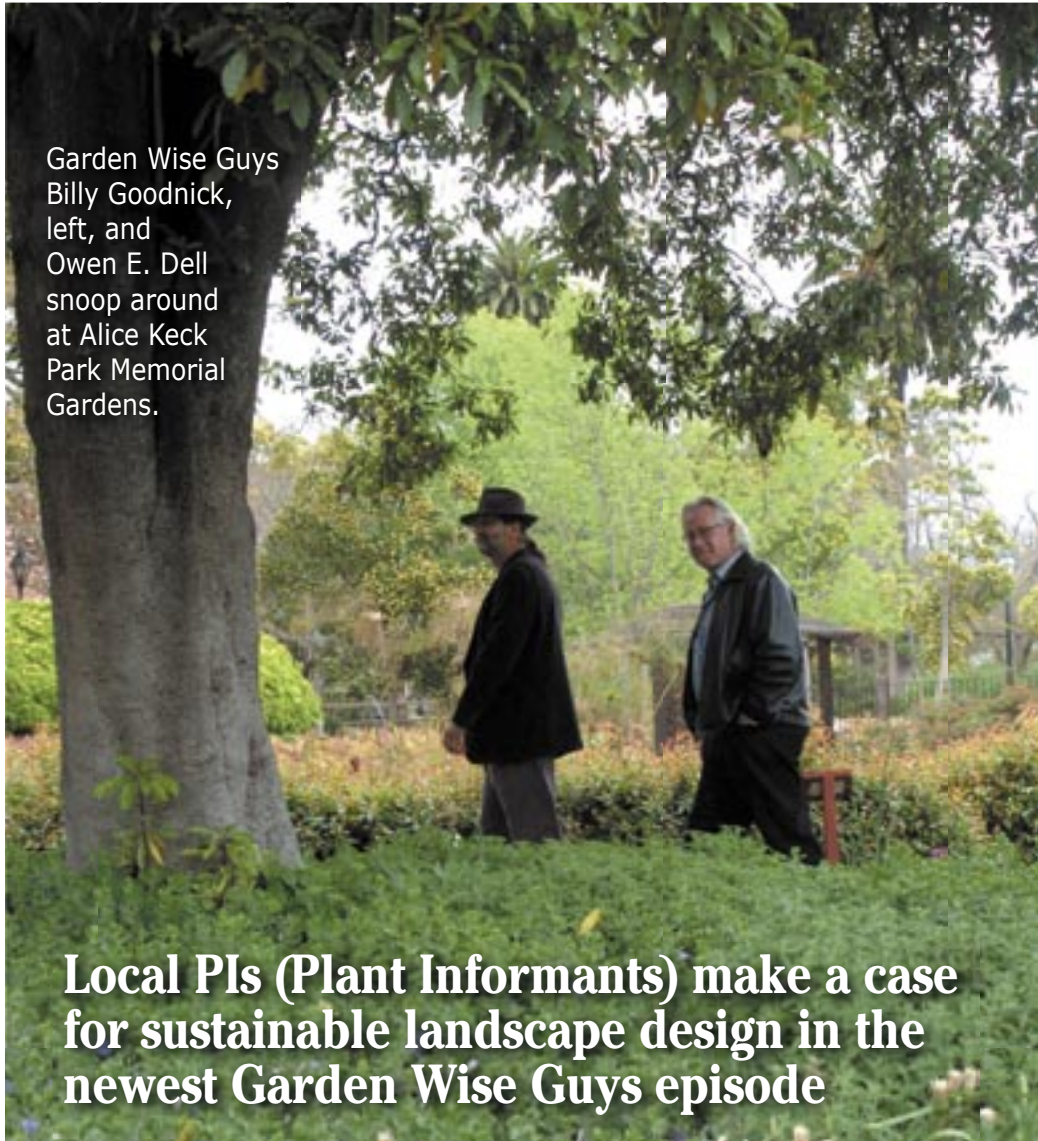


SATURDAY, APRIL 29, 2006

## ON THE RIGHT TRACK

Charlotte Boechler, News-Press Staff Writer

Garden Wise Guys Billy Goodnick, left, and Owen E. Dell snoop around at Alice Keck Park Memorial Gardens.



### Local PIs (Plant Informants) make a case for sustainable landscape design in the newest Garden Wise Guys episode

The night had a balmy feel. The kind that would go down good with a double scotch. But the guys had work to do. That much was clear the moment the envelope was slipped under the door.

"What's in the envelope?"

"I don't know. It's not marked."

With the contents in hand, one Billy Goodnick eyed the photos suspiciously.

"Begonias. Oh, that's cute."

"Nice garden," he added, sizing up the next one, "but it's not very Santa Barbara."

"Wait a minute! What's this?" his partner, Owen E. Dell, said, holding a piece of paper, nothing more than a jumble of cut-out letters.

It was the ransom note.

"You've got 24 hours to deliver plans or else Dirtrude gets cooked! . . . Midnight at Joe's . . ."

Signed "Mr. X."

So begins "A Sustainable Garden on a DEADline," the new detective show that cracks down on irresponsible gardening that can be seen 9 p.m. Sundays on Channel 18. It features the Garden Wise Guys -- aka Mr. Goodnick and Mr. Dell, two of Santa Barbara's veteran landscape architects -- who appear about every three months in new episodes dedicated to sustainable landscaping. That is, gardens that essentially thrive on their own through environmentally friendly practices.

Grabbing their trench coats, the two made their way over to the State Street bar just before the clock struck midnight.

"Hi boyyys!"

It was the same dame whose silhouette appeared in the window of the door just before the envelope was slipped under it. You could tell she was platinum blond, even though she was in black-and-white.

"You look familiar! Do I know you?" said the breathy voice.

"I'm Billy Goodnick with the city of Santa Barbara Parks and Recreation Department."

"Hello! I'm Owen Dell with County Landscape and Design. We're the Garden Wise Guys."

As if she didn't know.

"Can I buy you a drink?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'll have a Deadly Night Shade. That's a double shot of organic tomato juice."

"I need to concentrate. I'll just have a compost tea with a side of mycorrhizal fungi."

"I'll be right back . . ." she purrs.

And that was the beginning of their downfall. Or was it?

Will the two come up with a design for a sustainable landscape for Mr. X in time? Will Mr. X approve it and return Dirtrude, their beloved sidekick, safe and sound? Tune in to find out.

"A Sustainable Garden on a DEADline" is the fourth episode in the Garden Wise Guys series.

Funded by local water agencies, the series is intended to educate the community on the benefits of sustainable landscaping. Previous episodes have focused on the importance of plant selection, proper irrigation and healthy soil, including composting and mulching. The current one focuses on design.

"We're not just doing a garden show," insists Mr. Dell, 55, sans trench coat on a recent morning at Alice Keck Park Memorial Gardens, where portions of the current episode were shot. "There are lots of garden shows. Most of them urge people to go in the completely wrong direction."

"All those shows on HGTV are about instant gratification," added Mr. Goodnick, 54, referring to how things are planted just for visual effect without considering if it's right for the area. "What they never do is come back a year later and show you what a ridiculous garden they've created."

For example, shade-loving plants that are burned from too much sun; drought-tolerant flowers that wilt because they get too much water; and trees that outgrow the small space they were given.

When the Wise Guys are on a case, they don't just focus on aesthetics. They consider how the garden will function in its surroundings.

Their show may not appear on HGTV, but Mr. Goodnick, a city landscape architect, and Mr. Dell, whose business focuses on sustainable landscaping, have no reason to worry about finding an audience.

"In Santa Barbara, because of the kind of population we have and awareness, there's a much higher percentage of people who do these things and accept them here than probably anywhere else," said Mr. Dell.

"It's still a small percentage, but it's moving in the right direction. There's more and more interest. Shows like ours help. "If people watch the show and come away with one or two ideas, they're moving a little bit closer to the ideal," added Mr. Goodnick.

The ideal, of course, is creating a garden that sustains itself and, in turn, reduces the negative impact on the environment. But since environmental concern alone hasn't been enough to increase the numbers of those practicing it, what other incentives are there?

"It's less work," said Mr. Goodnick. "An ideal garden, to me, is one where it so closely approximates a natural system that you really don't have to do much. Nobody goes up in the Santa Ynez Mountains and turns on the sprinklers, rakes, fertilizes, trims. It just takes care of itself."

A garden can do the same, he said. It can be filled with plants that don't exceed the size of the bed, reducing the need for trimming. It can be filled with plants that are suited to the amount of light the area receives to prevent them from

weakening and being attacked by insects, reducing the need for applying pesticides. It can be filled with plants appropriate for the type of soil they're planted in, reducing the need for adding fertilizer.

A sustainable landscape can also be cheaper to maintain. Drought-tolerant plants use less water. Mulch saves on fertilizer. And bug-resistant plants help eliminate pesticides.

With the garden doing most of the work itself, your gardener doesn't have to -- and that, said Mr. Dell, can also mean big savings.

After investigating the principles of sustainable gardening, you can easily put them to use. One way, said Mr. Goodnick, is to ask yourself if you need a lawn.

"There are a thousand different materials that you can have on the floor of your garden," he said. "A lawn is just one."

And not necessarily the best one.

"The lawn is the highest resource (consumer per) square-foot you can put in," he explained. "There's water, fertilizer, weed killer, mowing, generally with a gas-powered lawn mower that uses up fossil fuel and has low efficiency, so there's much more pollution coming out."

An alternative is a "meadow."

"It's an unmowed collection of plants that's more diverse than a monoculture of grass," said Mr. Dell, adding that it could include ground morning glory, sedges, catmint and yarrow. Many substitutes will flower.

"They give you a lot more interest than just a green lawn," added Mr. Goodnick.

The Garden Wise Guys episodes uncover tips like these and more. All, hopefully, before viewers decide to flip the channel -- something they may be inclined to do with a show about sustainable landscaping. Which is where the storytelling comes in.

After basically playing it straight for the first two episodes, Mr. Goodnick and Mr. Dell decided to try different genres, starting with "Journey to the Center of the Dirt," a spoof on the sci-fi movie "Journey to the Center of the Earth." It discussed healthy soil, including mulching and composting.

And it was actually entertaining.

"If you have a plot -- even if it's an inane plot -- it's something that will keep the viewer watching," said Mr. Dell.

That explains the current episode's kidnapping of Dirtrude, their beloved sidekick -- a rubber chicken.

The Garden Wise Guys got their chance to get her back. Before their 24 hours were up, they met Mr. X in a dark alley. He demanded the plans. They demanded the chicken.

As for whether they got Dirtrude back, let's just say they aren't called the Garden Wise Guys for nothing.

e-mail: [cboechler@newspress.com](mailto:cboechler@newspress.com)

