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PHOTOGRAPHED BY RICHIE STEFFEN

Resistance Movement

*One nursery makes a mission
of cultivating deer and drought survivors*

LITTLE LOPEZ VILLAGE boasts a full-scale, year-round nursery right in the heart of town. Proprietors Patty and Brett Stewart live nearby, so they fully appreciate the challenges of garden-making on rain-shadowed Lopez Island. People come to escape the gloom, but quickly find they're not only gardening in droughty conditions but in deer country. So it's no surprise that the Stewarts' Islandscape Nursery and Garden Center specializes in deer-proof and drought-tolerant plants. Because Patty couldn't stop actively discouraging shoppers from buying too-thirsty plants, she finds it wiser to stock plants ideal for dry, rugged island conditions.

Patty and Brett came to Lopez via Pennsylvania and Los Angeles, respectively. They met on the island of Kauai, lived for a while in New Zealand and ended up on Lopez restoring a run-down old nursery. Now they've gauged their market so well they nearly sell out every spring and summer weekend.

Not only have the Stewarts had plenty of up-close, firsthand experience with deer predation in their own garden, but they also hear plenty of stories from their customers. Patty has learned that there is more to making deer-resistant gardens than just avoiding plants preferred by the four-legged eating machines. "So much of it has to do with where the plants are in the garden," she says. "Clearings in the woods are just hopeless."

In wide-open spaces filled with deer food, a gardener has a better chance of saving choice plants from becoming dinner. A plant's age can save it, too, because while deer may eat young, tender mahonia and *Garrya elliptica*, they leave them alone once the plants mature. So if you can get a plant through its first few years and into the seriously woody stage, it may well escape deer damage.

Another challenge on Lopez is salt-water intrusion into wells. The Stewarts' well had to be dug 320 feet deep for an adequate supply of water. While using precious water to irrigate lawns doesn't make sense, some people can't quite give up the idea of grass, even on a rocky island. So the Stewarts stock seed for what they call "water-saving fescue." Sold by a company called Barenbrug (P.O. Box 239, Tangent, Ore., 800-547-4101), the dark-green grass is a blend of turf-type tall fescues that is heat-, drought- and shade-tolerant. "The top grows like a fescue, but the roots go down 3 feet," says Brett, suggesting new lawns be seeded in the fall. After six months, the Barenbrug fescue should be well enough established to survive without supplementary water.

"We sell what we refer to as Darwinian plants; we don't sell diaper plants," is how Patty sums up their rough-and-ready stock. A short list of her favorite less-thirsty plants include creeping and woolly thyme,



Brett and Patty Stewart are the proprietors of Islandscape Nursery and Garden Center in the heart of little Lopez Village. They stock their nursery with mostly deer- and drought-resistant plants ideal for dry, rocky island conditions.

lavender, many of the ornamental grasses, and the little fuzzy-leaved rhododendron 'Lucy Lou.' "Many of the dwarf rhododendrons are drought-tolerant, and you can't believe how well hellebores do without watering," she says.

The Stewarts have discovered that drought- and deer-tolerant plants go hand in hand. Not only do thyme, hellebores, grasses and lavender tolerate dry soil, but deer leave them alone. Patty is cautious about making claims regarding what deer will and won't chomp — she knows they'll even make a meal of prickly holly if they're hungry enough. While she stops short of promising that her list of deer-proof plants is foolproof, she's found an entire garden's worth of plants that flourish despite deer and drought. To garden without hoses or fear of deer, she suggests rosemary, euphorbias, hardy geraniums, vine maples, most conifers, sages, salvias, peonies, colchicums, perovskia, santolina "and all those other gray Mediterranean plants."

The Stewarts also give their customers a reality check on maintenance, siting of plants and water requirements, asking, "Do you have your ground all ready for this plant?" They preach planting for longevity, preparing the soil, choosing a plant that's just right for the amount of sun or shade available. "I grew up in the East," says Patty, "and saw so many beautiful multi-generational old gardens. My pet peeve is people decorating with plants instead of gardening — it drives me crazy."

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