Five years ago I was asked to design a garden outside of Stonyford. The setting was dramatic – a rugged canyon with Stonyford Creek running through it. The long, two story house has views looking across the canyon and down onto the garden. The climate is harsh. Being in the rain shadow of the coast range, precipitation is sparse and the usual Sacramento Valley summers are hot. The winters offer up occasional snow and temperatures dipping into the teens. The soil is lean and fast draining.

The requirement by the owners was for a garden that could survive for weeks or months if the well went dry. My goal within that broad framework was to design a drought tolerant garden that would be attractive through the seasons, from within the garden and looking down onto it. Now, no matter the time of year when I visit the garden for maintenance, I am moved by how attractive and varied it is through the seasons.

A balance of evergreen and herbaceous or deciduous plants was needed to make the space visually interesting through the year. At least 80% of the plants are California native plants. Swaths of the low growing coyote bush, *Baccharis* ‘Twin Peaks’, provide a bright green constancy through the year. Along the upper path the low (non-native) rockrose, *Cistus salvifolius*, with its small sage-green leaves makes undulating mounds leading the eye along. Quantities of the native deer grass, *Muhlenbergia rigens*, with its spiky inflorescence developing in late summer, holds its own through the winter months weaving through groupings of Spanish lavender, baccharis, Russian sage, and low growing mats of *Salvia ‘Bee’s Bliss’*, tying them all together.

On the perimeter to screen the wide gravel driveway, a number of native shrubs were planted. Five *Arctostaphylos ‘Louis Edmonds’* are being pruned to display their elegant red bark and sculptural branching. It is through this open framework the garden will be seen by visitors coming down the driveway. Several *Fremontodendrons* were planted to hide the reflective concrete surface of the basketball court across the driveway. In a few years time they’ve grown to nearly 15’ and are fulfilling their role as envisioned. There are also redbuds and coffeeberry alongside the staggered rail fence.

For height and to provide summer shade by a large rustic bench, desert willow, *Chilopsis linearis* is planted. This is perfect by a bench
as it leafs out late in the season providing shade when it is needed most on summer afternoons. The activity of hummingbirds attracted to the long season of tubular flowers is a bonus for those sitting on the bench.

The view of the garden from the bench was designed to be more intimate by using lower growing perennials and smaller grasses. A favorite combination of mine is to use Penstemon ‘Marguerita BOP’ in the vicinity of the sulphur buckwheat. Both have thrived in this garden. The penstemon is smothered with spikes of rich blue flowers on short spikes at the same time the eriogonum is producing its domed clusters of bright yellow flowers. A fine contrast in flower color and shape.

Nearby, water drips into a simple, scallop edged plow disc set on a large rock. Goldfinches, hummingbirds, bluebirds and others are constant visitors. The fragrant leaved Sierra mint, Pycnanthemum californicum is planted at the base of the rock, colonizing happily in the moist ground along with some juncus, blue-eyed grass, and seedling cattails which have naturally seeded themselves. The silver foliaged Mediterranean salvia, ‘Nazareth’ with light pink flowers, is planted on the high and dry side of the rock.

A number of native salvias are well represented in this garden. They provide color, fragrance and attract many native bees and butterflies. The hybrid ‘Bee’s Bliss’ has made itself perfectly at home spreading its silver foliage luxuriantly through the clumps of deer grass. Salvia mellifera, black sage, has been indestructible with no irrigation and is a magnet for bees. S. clevelandii has been more temperamental often dying back in the winter months – perhaps due to cold combined with wet soils, as has the white sage, S. apiana. I haven’t given up on them. With fingers crossed there are currently several nice looking plants of each. The hummingbird sage, S. spathacea is colonizing nicely under a desert willow, where it seems to appreciate relief from the direct sun.

The owner recently paid a high compliment to the garden. He told me how one day he was sitting on the bench reading a non-fiction book that was a bit depressing. He set the book down and was soon immersed in the garden - the playful action of the hummingbirds, birds at the birdbath, the orange flowers of the zauschneria blending with tawny grass seed heads. He soon lost the tension, finding ease and contentment in his garden.