

Headed in the Right Direction



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Claudio Rohrsetzer says his small San Francisco Bay-area company is a preview of tomorrow's landscape industry

Twenty years ago, the landlord of the duplex in which Claudio Rohrsetzer lived offered to give him a credit on his rent if he would take care of the garden. Rohrsetzer agreed, and doing the work inspired him to pursue landscape contracting as a career. "I always liked to work with plants and be outside," Rohrsetzer says.



Claudio Rohrsetzer, owner of My Urban Gardener, shows off an ecological garden in El Cerrito, Calif.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CLAUDIO ROHRSETZER.

He purchased a used lawn mower and a few tools, and within several months he was doing landscaping for 15 clients in his neighborhood. Today, Rohrsetzer owns and operates My Urban Gardener in the San Francisco Bay area in California. With three full-time employees, the company services mostly residential customers in the East Bay area.

Design, install, maintain

My Urban Gardener specializes in landscape design, installation and maintenance with a focus on residential drip irrigation, permaculture practices and backyard beekeeping. Its ecological design services include landscape design utilizing CAD and 3-D photo rendering, use of California natives and Mediterranean plants, habitat and rain gardens, butterfly gardens, urban food forests, herb spirals and keyhole beds.

When Rohrsetzer creates a keyhole bed, he starts with an 8 to 10-foot-diameter circle bed, pierced on one side by a path to the center. He says that using a creative pattern in the garden will create more edges and often increases diversity and productivity.

My Urban Gardener

Headquarters: Oakland, Calif.

Founder and Owner: Claudio Rohrsetzer

Founded: 1991

Services: Complete Garden Management and Care, Irrigation, Ecological Design, Beekeeping
Market: East San Francisco Bay area

Employees: 3

Website: www.myurbangardener.com

The design also provides easy access with minimum path-to-bed ratio – a “least path” design, he says. The horseshoe-shaped beds are sized so the entire area can easily be reached when standing in the keyhole. The beds can be situated near a house for quick access or along a main pathway.

Rohrsetzer suggests people plant basil/chives in the first row, and then a row of tomatoes interplanted with marigolds – which reduces nematodes – followed by an outside planting of Jerusalem artichokes or sunflowers to act as a wind shelter and reflect the sun, creating a favorable microclimate for tomatoes.

Irrigation services include design, installation and repair; sprinklers and drip irrigation; and system updates and maintenance. Garden maintenance services include complete garden management and care; use of sustainable, organic and permaculture practices; selective pruning; mulching; and water conservation.

My Urban Gardener will provide one-time or ongoing maintenance service.

Philosophical practices

Rohrsetzer’s philosophy about turf centers on permaculture and organic practices. He likes to ensure that irrigation systems are properly maintained to avoid runoff. He also likes to keep grass clippings on the lawn.



My Urban Gardener uses organic plant health techniques.

Forest gardening is among the permaculture and organic practices that Rohrsetzer incorporates into his business. Permaculture is based on the philosophy of cooperation with nature and caring for the earth and its people, and centers around creating sustainable human habitats by following nature’s patterns. This practice uses the diversity, stability and resilience of natural ecosystems to help people develop their own sustainable solutions to challenges on a local, national or global scale.

Forest gardening involves putting plants together in woodland-like patterns that forge mutually beneficial relationships, creating a garden ecosystem meant to be more than the sum of its parts. Fruits, nuts, vegetables, herbs, mushrooms and other useful plants can be grown in a way that mimics natural ecosystems.



Rohrsetzer's philosophy about turf centers on permaculture practices.

Herb spirals are a spiral of rocks created to enclose soil. Many species of herbs are planted within that spiral. The rock warms and dehumidifies the soil. The extended edge wrapped in on itself provides a diversity of conditions, creating high productivity in a small space, but is easy to water and harvest.

The company also does companion planting of different crops in close physical proximity. This practice is a form of polyculture used by farmers and gardeners worldwide.

My Urban Gardener also creates rain gardens, which are strategically located in low areas with plants that intercept runoff. Rain gardens slow water down to prevent erosion and allow the water to be absorbed into the ground. Plants are often chosen for their ability to remove pollution and toxins.

Organic maintenance techniques

To help maintain these types of plant designs, My Urban Gardener employs organic gardening techniques that do not use chemical pesticides, fertilizers or other additives, but instead relies on plant-derived means to control pests and amend the soil for optimum production.



Rohrsetzer is happy with where he is now.

Rohrsetzer utilizes integrated pest management (IPM) in his landscape maintenance practices. He favors IPM methods to prevent unacceptable levels of pest damage by the most economical means with the least possible hazard to people, property and the environment, he says.

My Urban Gardener uses a sheet mulching technique for building beds and suppressing weeds. In short, a thick layer of newspaper or cardboard is placed over the weeds, and then it is covered with mulch and given a significant watering.

The company utilizes a six-step organic lawn care system. It includes:

<0x2022> First treatment: a spring growth activator that "awakens" the soil and feeds turf with beneficial soil microorganisms, humic acid, kelp, amino acids, vitamins, biotin, folic acid and natural sugars.

<0x2022> Second treatment: a biologically enhanced spring fertilizer. The quality of turf and the soil health are addressed through 54 strains of beneficial soil bacteria and naturally occurring macronutrients.

<0x2022> Third treatment: a midseason kelp spray. This treatment helps prepare for the stress of summer with a formulation containing natural plant growth compounds, amino acids, micronutrients and vitamins.

<0x2022> Fourth treatment: a "summer saver" biofertilizer. This chelated

microbial fertilizer addresses turf needs as temperatures rise and water is less available.

<0x2022> Fifth treatment: a late-season organic growth compound. As root development is critical in the fall, Rohrsetzer uses a biologically active organic fertilizer that simultaneously addresses turf vigor and soil biology.

<0x2022> Sixth treatment: winterizing humates. The potassium humate and amino acids help harden off turf cell structure to protect it from winter extremes. A natural source of nitrogen also feeds the turf for improved color and growth in the spring.

Education is key

As for employees, when hiring, Rohrsetzer looks for people who are “honest, reliable and willing to learn.” He likes reliable equipment as well, and uses mostly Honda mowers and Echo and Kawasaki blowers, weed eaters and hedge pruners.

Ongoing education is important to Rohrsetzer, and through the years he has augmented his business experience with certifications. He received a Pest Control Branch 2 certificate from UC Berkeley in 1998; was named a California Master Gardener in Alameda County; was awarded a Permaculture Design Certificate from the Regenerative Design Institute (RDI) in 2005 and completed studies in Permaculture Advanced Design Skills from RDI in 2009; he has a California Landscape Contractors License; a Qualified Applicator Certificate; a Sustainable Landscape Certificate from Sonoma State University; and has attended several workshops at RDI and the Occidental Arts and Ecology Center.

As much as Rohrsetzer enjoys ongoing education, he also finds it important to pass along his knowledge to customers. His tips for customers maintaining an organic lawn include testing soil, engaging in “wise” watering practices, using natural fertilizers, topdressing with compost, mowing high, recycling clippings, aerating every other year, overseeding and sharpening lawn mower blades at least once a year.

Prepared for ongoing change

Rohrsetzer says his biggest challenge is working toward company growth “without getting too big. I don’t want to start working in the office.” Five years from now, he says, “I don’t want to be very far from where I am now. I’m happy the way I’m doing it.”

Rohrsetzer believes he’s on board with the direction the industry is heading into the future. “I see a lot of change in the way the services will be performed, with more environmentally friendly machines and cultural practices,” he says. “Everybody is worried about the environment, climate change, indiscriminate use of pesticides and herbicides. I’m prepared for that change.”

Carol Brzozowski is a member of the Society of Environmental Journalists and has written extensively about environmental issues for numerous trade journals for more than a decade. She resides in Coral Springs, Fla.