One of the great perks of working at Sunset is my picturesque view of our 4-acre garden designed by the famous landscape architect Thomas Church. Magnificent oaks dot the landscape, redwoods and pines frame the long-distance view, and flowers bloom year-round. Head gardener Rick LaFrentz works magic with the seasonal beds of color, bringing in a wonderful array of annuals, perennials, and bulbs.

This past spring in the bed right outside my window appeared the most glorious combination of deep maroon ‘Queen of Night’ tulips (from Van Dyck’s, 800/248-2852) overplanted with bright yellow calendulas.

I had watched LaFrentz plant the calendulas last fall; they bloomed first. Since I’m not particularly fond of golden yellow flowers, I barely took notice of them outside my window. But when the tulips poked up through the calendulas and burst into bloom, I couldn’t take my eyes off the display. It was an interesting lesson in the use of color.

GARDENING THE LEAST TOXIC WAY
I’m a strong proponent of gardening without the use of highly toxic pesticides, which is why the new “Grow It!” guide from Marin County Stormwater Pollution Prevention Program (MCSTOPPP) appeals to me.

The 17-page, pocket-size fan guide (riveted together like a paint-chip selector) was produced in an effort to prevent toxic pollutants from entering storm drains and polluting streams and the San Francisco Bay. It features 17 plant pests, explaining how to detect them, low-toxicity controls, and prevention techniques. On the flip side of the cards are plant lists, including deer-resistant plants, fire-resistant plants, invasive plants, and native plants that attract butterflies.

Six other Bay Area counties (all but Sonoma and Napa) have similar guides, though some are less comprehensive than Marin’s. They’re free and can be ordered by calling (888) 229-9473.

SOURCE FOR GINGER PLANTS
The phone number listed for Brady’s Exotics in the August issue is no longer in service. Try the Banana Tree, which sells 25 kinds of gingers (including kahili) and other tropical plants. To order, call (610) 253-9589, or check out the catalog on the firm’s Web site: http://www.banana-tree.com.

That’s a good question ...

Q: Do you know of a book or Web site that lists the names of nurseries and the specific plants they sell? I understand they have such a publication in Britain. — Marge Tooles, Santa Rosa

A: The closest publication we have is Gardening by Mail, by Barbara J. Barton (Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1994, $21.95), updated monthly on the Virtual Garden Web site (http://vg.com/gbm). It’s a wonderful sourcebook for almost anything related to gardening.

Got a gardening question? Write to Lauren Bonar Swezey, Sunset Magazine, 80 Willow Rd., Menlo Park, CA 94025. Send e-mail (including your full name and address) to swezeyl@sunsetpub.com.