Why Use Native Plants?

Seven Reasons to Use Native Plants

1. California’s True Landscape
Landscape is part of a place’s regional identity and natural heritage. Curiously, most manmade landscapes in California are examples of gardens from other parts of the world. California has multiple landscape identities with a tremendous range of vegetation. Early Europeans found California vegetation fascinating and sent samples home to botanical gardens. Native Americans knew and depended on local plants for their livelihood. Display California’s beautiful and natural identity in your landscape by using native plants.

2. Low Maintenance
Our local environment (climate, exposure, soil type) is home to native vegetation. As with any maintained garden, natives do require attention and care, but with less water, less fertilizer, less pesticide, less pruning and less of your time than do many common garden plants.

3. Save Water
Local California native plant species survive in nature with only rainfall for irrigation. You can take advantage of low water use species in your garden. Once established, these species need minimal to no irrigation beyond normal rainfall. Saving water saves money and conserves a vital resource.

4. Pesticide Freedom
Native plants have evolved defenses against native pests, and are usually resistant to non-native pests too. When plants are your partners for managing a pest problem, you have greater freedom to decide the amount and type of pesticide to use, if any at all.

5. Support Local Ecology
Land development reduces natural habitat. To balance development activities and loss of natural habitat, plant native vegetation in yards, gardens, parks, roadways, and other manmade landscapes. While not a replacement for lost habitat, native plants in urban areas can provide extensions to nearby remaining natural ecosystems. As a further step, get involved in local land use planning processes at the grass roots level. Recommend natives to homeowner associations, neighbors, and civic departments.

6. Invite Birds and Butterflies
Many of the best plants for attracting hummingbirds, butterflies and other beautiful creatures are the native plants they have used for thousands of years. Invite the species you want to see, whether it is birds, dragonflies, honey bees, native bees, beneficial insects, or interesting animals by planting their favorite natives in your landscape.

7. Explore the Variety
Large delicate white Matilija Poppy petals, aromatic Sages, abundant pink flowers on a Western Redbud tree in spring, shredded hanging bark on a Catalina Ironwood — these are a few examples of the intriguing and beautiful plants found naturally in California. Add a few local species to your existing garden, or go totally native. Your explorations can lead others to discover the diversity of characteristics that natives possess.

“Our task is to create a new landscape tradition…that is respectful of the nature of California and its priceless value in our lives and the lives of all that inhabit it.”

~ Mark Francis and Andreas Reimann,
The California Landscape Garden

Cover photo: California Poppy, Eschscholzia californica; Meadow Onion, Allium unifolium; California Redwood, Sequoia sempervirens.
Inside photo: Mission Mallow, Lavatera assurgentifolia

A statewide, non-profit organization of amateurs and professionals with a common interest in learning about and preserving California Native Plants. Membership is open to all.

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Where are Native Plants?

Plants to See
Native plants can be seen in specialty arboreums and botanic gardens, books, web sites, demonstration gardens, nature preserves, National Forests, and nurseries that specialize in native plants. Several premier gardens open to the public are Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden in Claremont, Santa Barbara Botanic Garden, UC Santa Cruz Arboretum, and both UC Botanic Garden and Tilden Regional Parks Botanic Garden in Berkeley.

Plants to Buy
• CNPS plant sales – contact information can be found on the chapter website links at www.cnps.org
• Nurseries specializing in native plants
• Arboreums and botanic gardens with natives
• Native plant publications and Internet searches for organizations selling native plants
• Other local and statewide sources found on the CNPS website

Do Not Collect From the Wild
Collecting plants without a permit is illegal on most public land in California. If you know an area that is slated for development, consider asking the owner for written permission to dig up, collect seed, and take cuttings from plants that will otherwise be lost. If you live in a wildland/urban interface area, please consult your local native plant nursery for information regarding concerns of hybridization of rare and endangered species and gene pool contamination.

How are Traditional and Native Gardening Different?

In every garden, the right environment (sun, soil, water, etc.) must be found or created for plants to grow. Once established, the environment and plants require maintenance. Growing native plants is no exception, but differences exist in the details.

Growing Conditions
Like all living things, native plants do best when grown under natural and familiar conditions, also known as communities. Common California plant communities include northern or southern oak woodland, valley grassland, chaparral, desert, coastal sage scrub and bluff, mixed evergreen, and redwood forest. Choosing plants that are native to your landscape’s community will help ensure their optimum health and performance.

Planting
Although California natives can be planted at any time of the year, it is best to put them in the ground during autumn and early winter. This gives them time to establish roots before the strenuous summer months.

Watering
Once established, many native plants survive on minimal supplemental water. Several species maintain a healthy appearance for much of the year while being watered only one to four times per month. In fact, too much irrigation can kill many local species.

Soil Treatments
Most native plants perform better without any fertilizer! Fertilizers push plants to grow quickly, sometimes beyond naturally supportable levels, so additional water and fertilizer must be applied again and again. Mulching generally adds no appreciable nutrients to the soil, and yet it is a valuable practice in low maintenance gardening. A layer of mulch slows water evaporation, prevents weed germination, and creates a favorable environment at the soil interface for beneficial biological bacteria. Adding organic matter to soil is vital where cut-and-fill development has left an infertile top layer.

Pruning
Traditional garden plants are often pruned throughout the year to keep up with water and fertilizer induced growth. For most native plants, once per year pruning is sufficient. Prune in early autumn before the rainy season, which is the dormant period for most natives. Give your plants room to grow; this technique helps decrease the need for pruning.

Getting Started

Your First Selections
Visit a supplier of native plants, especially in autumn. Your local CNPS chapter is a wonderful source for plant suggestions. Many chapters have their own plant sales and helpful discussion groups with people happy to share their experience and knowledge. Contact information can be found on the chapter website links at www.cnps.org. After making your selections, follow the supplier’s instructions for placing and caring for your new plants.

Extending Your Selections
With a little curiosity and research, you can broaden the number of species planted or focus on specific themes.

Collect ideas from books, arboreums, native nurseries, nature trails, web sites, and CNPS meetings. Some natives are challenging to grow, and over time you will find which ones perform best for you. For example, if drainage is an issue, consider creating mounds of decomposed granite, rocks, and logs to create a more natural effect and enhance drainage.

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