Central California Native Plant Gardening

Welcome to gardening with California native plants!

The Great Valley in its pre-European period was a community of grasslands. The rich clay soil supported perennial grasses and annual flowers. The foothills were primarily oak woodlands and chapparral communities. Each supported native birds and insects that are driven away by swaths of lawn and exotic plants.

You can help native birds and insects by incorporating the plants to which they are naturally drawn. California is a big state. Remember that even though a plant is a California native, it won’t automatically do well in your yard. Look to plant communities described on the reverse side of this page rather than simply “California native.”

Tips for selecting a native plant

Think plant community. Native plants are wildly successful when grown as close as possible to the natural habitat to which they’ve adapted over hundreds of thousands of years. Sequoia Chapter of CNPS members (sponsors of a fall plant sale) live in a wide range of geography and rainfall: from Bass Lake (37 inches of rain/year) to North Fork (35 inches/year) to Auberry (24 inches/year) to Fresno (11 inches/year).

You can often simulate a plant’s natural world, within reason, but it requires much more work than simply selecting plants that are naturally suited to your area.

Over the years, native birds, butterflies, and insects will discover your native plants. Grow native plants from the same community together to restore the health of the soil as well as the general environment.

Once established, natives require minimal care, little water, and no fertilizer. In areas or years of sparse rainfall, your goal is to water only in the summer months and only every couple of weeks. Higher rainfall areas (22 or more inches) with an average rainfall year may not need to water at all once the plants are established!

It’s all about the roots. The first few years of growth should be under the surface. This is the time referred to as “getting established.” For the first two years it’s a good thing if your native plant is healthy above the ground but just “...doesn’t seem to be growing that much.” Once a native plant is established it will naturally grow to its normal size and you’ll be amazed! If you’re amazed in the first year or two, it’s a sign you may be watering too much. You may have a lot of lush growth above the ground but you’ve encouraged the plant’s roots to remain close to the surface and become dependent on your watering schedule.

Soil and planting

Plant natives in October and November for best success. The ground is still warm and it gives them the best chance to establish strong, deep roots. Disturb the soil as little as possible when planting. Native plants rely on fungi in the soil. Don’t break up the soil or add amendments. If you have clay soil that is rock-hard in summer, water the area deeply a week before planting.

Test the soil. When the surrounding soil is dry, determine how well the soil drains in the spot where you intend to place your plant. Dig a shovel-sized hole and fill with water. 1 minute or less is perfect drainage; 1-45 minutes is good. More than a day is poor. While it is draining, pull any weeds from the surrounding area. Do not till the soil to eliminate weeds.

Spacing. Take care not to plant your natives too closely together. Plant them based on how large they will grow in a few years and control your desire to have them quickly fill the space. Remember that they’re setting a good root foundation for their long-term growth. This is particularly important in our hot, rainless summers and periodic (normal) drought years.

Dig the hole. When you are ready to plant, dig a hole only slightly larger than the root ball. Turn the plant upside down and remove the pot. With your finger, scrape the root ball to loosen the outside roots and ensure they are not coiled. Place the plant in the hole and fill with the native soil. The plant crown should sit about 1” above the surrounding surface. Tamp it down to ensure good contact with the native soil (use your feet but be gentle if the soil is very wet).

Add mulch. Use rock or gravel (4-6”) for desert plants. Woodland plants prefer 1-4” of tree mulch. Now slowly soak the plant and its immediate surrounding area with many, many gallons of water.

Mulch will keep most weeds at bay. Keep the mulch 6” from the main stem. Pull weeds when they are small to keep from robbing your plants of nutrients and water.

Soil in New Housing Developments. This is a special situation. All the surface soil is typically replaced with a layer of hard-packed earth topped with a layer of unimproved subsoil. This unimproved subsoil is devoid of most natural nutrients: earthworms, beneficial bacteria, or fungi roots. The packed soil below provides little ability for the roots of larger plants to penetrate. In some cases break through the packed earth to allow trees to send roots down. It is even more important for you to plant, mulch, and water by plant community. Once plants that belong together are able to aid one another, the fungi and bacteria will develop.

Water

Rainfall should eventually be all the water that your native plants need, especially if you have grouped plants with similar water and soil needs. Be mindful of planting a native plant with little water requirements near an area that is frequently watered.

Water only during the cool of the morning or on days that are expected to be cool.

- First 2 months after planting. No matter when you plant, don’t allow the root ball to dry out. Keep it moist, not wet. After planting, water about once a week in the cool of the morning (before 8 am) or late evening (after 6 pm) and water the basin and the root ball.

- First Year. There is no formula that works for everyone or every plant. The best plan is to observe. Every week or two check the soil 1-2 inches under the mulch and if it’s moist, don’t water. Only water if the plant needs it. When you water, do so thoroughly and deeply.

- Ongoing. Your native garden will require less water as it matures, perhaps only once a month. If you must water, do so infrequently using a slow, deep watering technique. During the hottest summer months in the Valley, many plants look better when they receive supplemental watering. If the plant grows naturally in an area with more rainfall, you’ll need to water in the winter also. Be very careful with those plants that require NO summer water – water in July can kill them.

Pruning and fertilizing

Native plants don’t need fertilizer. End of subject.

Shrubs can be pruned once a year to keep their shape. Deadheading blossoms keeps plants tidy.

This information is introductory and by no means complete. You can, and should, ask questions, try different advice, learn from your mistakes, read about native plants, find out for yourself, and enjoy the journey taken by everyone who takes pleasure in growing California native plants!
This plant list is far from complete. When many species are available, they are indicated by “ssp.” in the scientific name in parentheses. Some species are better suited than others in your area.

There are many books about plant communities available. Browse through books, ask questions of others who grow natives, and read the Las Pilitas Web site (www.laspilitas.com) for more extensive plant lists and for a general education on California’s native plants.

When planting natives with non-natives, it is possible and can be very successful. Select natives with similar sun, soil, and water needs as the non-natives and your natives should adapt to their non-native neighbors.

What about planting natives with non-natives? It is possible and can be very successful. Select natives with similar sun, soil, and water needs as the non-natives and your natives should adapt to their non-native neighbors.

Valley Grasslands (Avg. annual rain: 7” – 35”)
Valley grasslands are characterized by shallow soils, grasses, annual flowers, and forbs.

San Joaquin Willow .................................. (Salix goodingii)
Saltbush .................................................. (Atriplex lentiformis)
Deer Grass ............................................. (Muhlenbergia rigens)
Needleglades ........................................... (Ceanothus ssp.)
Soap Plant .............................................. (Chromolaena pomeridiana)
Wooly Milkweed ...................................... (Achillea ssp.)
Yarrow ...................................................... (Achillea ssp.)
Blue Wild Rye .......................................... (Elymus glaucus)
Blue Dicks ............................................. (Dicholoasterom pulchella)
Harvest Brodiaea ...................................... (Brodiaea elegans)
Goldfields .............................................. (Lasthenia glabrata)
Lupine .................................................. (Lupinus ssp.)
Blue Curls ............................................... (Trichostema lanceolatum)
Poppy ..................................................... (Eschscholzia californica)

Riparian Areas
Water is available year-round. They need regular water unless planted in the vicinity of an existing creek or stream. Monitor needs because of the extra water. 

California Sycamore .................................. (Platanus racemosa)
Interior Live Oak ..................................... (Quercus wislizenii)
Valley Oak ........................................... (Quercus lobata)
Black Oak .............................................. (Quercus kelloggii)
Blue Oak .................................................. (Quercus kelloggii)
Canyon Live Oak .................................... (Quercus chrysolepis)
Cottonwood ............................................ (Populus fremontii)
Oregon Ash ............................................. (Fraxinus latifolia)
Willow .................................................. (Salix ssp.)
Blue Elderberry ....................................... (Sambucus mexicana)
Gooseberries ........................................ (Ribes species)
Western Redbud ..................................... (Cercis occidentalis)
Blackberry ............................................. (Rubus ursinus)
California Melic ........................................ (Melica californica)
Coral Bells ............................................ (Heuchera ssp.)
Rush ...................................................... (Juncus effusus)
Sedge .................................................... (Carex ssp.)
Wild Grape ............................................. (Vitis californica)
Wild Rose .............................................. (Rosa californica)
Yerba Mansa .......................................... (Anemopsis californica)

Coastal Sage Scrub (Avg. rain: 12” – 25”)
South of San Francisco to just above San Diego. Wood chip mulch works well as does a weekly spray in the summer and fall to wash off the dust.

Coyote Brush (Bush) ................................... (Baccharis pilularis)
Bush Lupine ........................................... (Lupinus arborescens)
Sages ..................................................... (Salvia ssp.)
Matilija Poppy ........................................ (Romneya coulteri)
Our Lord’s Candle ..................................... (Yucca whipplei)
Blue Grama ............................................. (Bouteloua gracilis)

Sequoia Chapter of the California Native Plant Society
A non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation of California native flora.

www.cnps-sequoia.org
20170331-R3