



Central California Native Plant Gardening

If you are new to planting and caring for California native plants, welcome to our world! We hope that you'll enjoy the colors and smells of Central California so much that you'll be back for more. More understanding, more experiences, more of California!

The Great Valley in its pre-European timeline was a community of grasslands. The rich clay soil supported perennial grasses and annual flowers. The foothills were primarily oak woodlands and chaparral communities. Each supported native birds and insects that are driven away by swaths of lawn and exotic plants. You can bring them back to your world by incorporating the native plants to which they are naturally drawn. California has a very diverse climate and geography, so remember that even though a plant is a California native, it does not mean it will automatically do well in your yard. Think in terms of plant communities rather than simply "California native."

Selecting. Native plants will be wildly successful if they are planted in an environment that is as close as possible to their natural habitat. Over hundreds of thousands of years they've adapted to their habitat. The Sequoia Chapter of CNPS (sponsors of the plant sale) has a membership living in a wide range of geography and rainfall: from Bass Lake (37 inches of rainfall per year) to North Fork (35 inches/year) to Auberry (24 inches/year) to Fresno (11 inches/year). Select your plants accordingly. You can often simulate a plant's natural world, within reason, but it will require much more work than simply selecting plants that are naturally suited to your area.

Once natives are established they require minimal care, little water, and no fertilizer. In areas or years of sparse rainfall, you should need to water only in the summer months and only once every couple of weeks. If you live in an area of higher rainfall (22 or more inches) and have a normal year, you may not need to water at all once your plants are established! The better suited your plant is to your area, the less work it will require. Over the years, native birds, butterflies, and insects will discover your native plants. Native plants grown together restore the health of the soil as well as the general environment. It is important to group plants that belong to the same community.

When selecting your plant, be sure it does not have roots coming out of the bottom of the pot and that its growth above the pot is reasonable for the size of pot. Observe the growth above ground and imagine a root structure equivalent to about ¾ of what's above. Select only that plant whose root structure fits comfortably in the pot and is not crowded.

Size. To grow natives successfully, realize that for the first few years most of the growth should be under the surface. This is the time referred to as "getting established." Believe it or not, 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 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 will 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.

Take care not to plant your natives too closely together. Plant them based on how large they will grow in a few years and try to 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.

Soil and Planting – General Information. The ideal time to plant natives is October and November. The ground is still warm and it gives them the best chance to establish roots that will serve them in the long term. An important bit of information when planting a new plant is to disturb the soil as little as possible. Tilling the soil or adding amendments breaks up the soil fungi on which native plants rely. If you have clay soil that is rock-hard, water the area a week before planting. When the surrounding soil is dry, find out about the drainage where you intend to place your plant by digging 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.

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.

Soil in New Housing Developments. You have a special situation here. Typically all the surface soil has been 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 – General Information. Rainfall should eventually account for the majority of the water needs of your natives. Be sure to select plants that are native to areas with similar water and soil as where you will be planting them. Be mindful of planting a native with little water requirements near an area that is frequently watered. When you do water, do so only during the cool of the morning or on days that are expected to be cool.

Water – First 2 Months After Planting. For the first two months after planting, no matter when you plant, the root ball should not be allowed to dry out, but it should be kept 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. Never water in the heat of the day even if the plant is showing signs of stress. Doing so can kill the plant.

Water – 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.

Water – Ongoing. As your native garden matures it will require less water, perhaps only once a month. If you must water, do it infrequently using a slow, deep watering technique. Overhead watering can encourage pathogens that like warm, moist conditions. 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 will kill them.

Pruning & Fertilizing. Native plants don't need fertilizer. End of subject. As for pruning, shrubs can be pruned once a year to keep their shape. Deadheading blossoms keeps plants tidy.

Mulch and Weeds. 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.

This information is introductory and by no means complete. You can, and should, ask questions, try different advice, learn from your mistakes, read about natives, find out for yourself, and enjoy the journey taken by everyone who takes pleasure in growing California natives!



References: Larry Vierheilig – Nipomo Native Garden, Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden – Care & Maintenance of California Native Plant Gardens by Bart O'Brien, Las Pilitas (www.laspilitas.com), A Short Lesson in Planting, Mulching, and Watering.

Assembled by the Sequoia Chapter of the California Native Plant Society (www.cnps-sequoia.org)

Plant Communities

When considering native plants, you will be most successful when you understand a little about the kinds of plants that naturally grow in the same community – the same plant community. In the Central Valley and adjacent foothills, a few communities that match our area are described here.

Remember that you can try to simulate any plant community but staying with those that closely match the climate, soil, and rainfall of your area will require the least amount of work over time. Much of the information on this page is summarized from the Las Pilitas Web site and various RSBAG* publications.

This plant list is far from being complete. In addition, there are many species that may be available. This is indicated by an “ssp.” after the genus in the scientific name in parentheses. Some are better suited than others in your area.

Browse through books, ask questions of others that use natives, and read the Las Pilitas Web site (www.laspilitas.com) for more extensive plant lists and for a valuable general education on California’s native plants.

Plant communities do not have hard boundaries. They merge into one another, transitioning as the climate, soil, and rainfall present different opportunities. Therefore you will see plants that cross into different communities. Generally if the same plant is found in drier and wetter areas, it will look better in your landscape with some regular water. (Regular is typically no more than once per week in the summer, once the plant is established. Sometimes it’s once a month.)

Plants in the list are grouped in various communities but this does not mean they can be simply be planted next to one another. Each species has its own soil and water tolerances within the overall community needs. Find out what your plant’s needs are before planting it.

Can I plant natives in with non-natives? You can certainly do this and be very successful. As long as you select natives that have similar sun, soil, and water needs as the non-natives (and you don’t fertilize), your natives will likely adapt to their non-native neighbors.

Central Oak Woodland (Rain: 11”-30”) This is the type of community for much of the Fresno area and upwards into the foothills. For most Sequoia chapter members, plants from this community will be right at home.

- Trees**
 - California Bay (*Umbellularia californica*)
 - Foothill (Grey) Pine (*Pinus sabiana*)
 - Foothill Ash (*Fraxinus dipetala*)
 - Oaks (*Quercus* species)
- Shrubs**
 - Coffeeberry and Redberry (*Rhamnus* ssp.)
 - Buckwheat (*Eriogonum* ssp.)
 - Blue Eldeberry (*Sambucus mexicana*)
 - Cherry (*Prunus* species)
 - Dogwoods (*Cornus* species)
 - Manzanita (*Arctostaphylos* ssp.)
 - Western Redbud (*Cercis occidentalis*)
 - Sage (*Salvia* ssp.)
 - Toyon (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*)
 - Wild Lilac (*Ceanothus* ssp.)
- Perennials**
 - Blue Flax (*Linum lewisii*)
 - California Fuchsia (*Zauschneria* ssp.)
 - California Melic (*Melica californica*)
 - Honeysuckle (*Lonicera interrupta*)
 - Lupine (*Lupinus* ssp.)
 - Needlegrasses (*Nassella* ssp.)
 - One Sided Blue Grass (*Poa secunda*)
 - Wild Rye (*Elymus* or *Leymus triticoides*)
 - Yerba Buena (*Satureja douglasii*)
 - Mariposa Lily (*Calochortus* ssp.)
- Annual**
 - Poppies (*Eschscholzia* ssp.)
 - Five Spot (*Nemophila maculata*)

Valley Grassland (Rain: 7”-35”) Valley grasslands do not only have grasses. They are characterized by shallow soils, annual flowers and forbs, plus grasses.

- Shrubs**
 - San Joaquin Willow (*Salix goodingii*)
 - Saltbush (*Atriplex lentiformis*)
 - Deer Grass (*Muhlenbergia rigens*)
 - Needlegrasses (*Nassella* ssp.)
 - Soap Plant (*Chlorogalum pomeridianum*)
 - Woolly Milkweed (*Asclepias eriocarpa*)
 - Yarrow (*Achillea* ssp.)
- Perennials**
 - Blue Wild Rye (*Elymus glaucus*)
 - Blue Dicks (*Dichelostemma pulchella*)
 - Harvest Brodiaea (*Brodiaea elegans*)
 - Goldfields (*Lasthenia glabrata*)
 - Lupine (*Lupinus* ssp.)
 - Vinegarweed (*Trichostema lanceolatum*)
 - Poppy (*Eschscholzia californica*)
- Annuals**

Riparian Areas This community has water available year-round. Unless you can plant these natives in the vicinity of an existing creek or stream, they will need to be regularly watered. Be prepared to monitor weeds because of the extra water.

- Trees**
 - Buttonwillow (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*)
 - 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.)
- Shrubs**
 - 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*)
- Perennials**

Creosote Bush Scrub (Rain: 2”-10”) This is the dominant community around towns in the Mojave. It supports hardy plants that survive extremes of climate. Our climate is less harsh but many plants from this area work nicely. The tough plants from this community have evolved on little water and well-drained soil. Rock mulch only on these desert survivors.

- Shrubs**
 - California Juniper (*Juniperus californica*)
 - Creosote Bush (*Larrea tridentata*)
 - Desert Willow (*Chilopsis linearis*)
 - Globemallow (*Sphaeralcea ambigua*)
 - Mormon Tea (*Ephedra nevadensis*)
 - Rabbit Brush (*Chrysothamnus nauseosus*)
 - Sulphur Buckwheat (*Eriogonum umbellatum*)
 - Prickly Pear (*Opuntia* ssp.)
 - White Sage (*Salvia apiana*)
- Perennial**
 - Alkalai Sacaton (*Sporobolus airoides*)
 - Encelia (*Encelia farinosa*)

Chaparral (Rain: 12”-35”) This community is in many areas of California from along the coast to our local western slope of the Sierra and in the mountains of Southern California. Keep your chaparral plants well cleaned of dead limbs and debris and remove weedy, non-native grasses.

- Trees**
 - Foothill Ash (*Fraxinus dipetala*)
 - Mahogany (*Cercocarpus* ssp.)
 - White Alder (*Alnus rhombifolia*)
 - Buckwheat (*Eriogonum* ssp.)
 - Bush Anemone (*Carpenteria californica*)
 - Flannelbush (*Fremontodendron* ssp.)
 - Indigo Bush (*Amorpha* ssp.)
- Shrubs**
 - Manzanita (*Arctostaphylos* ssp.)
 - Pink Sierra Currant (*Ribes nevadense*)
 - Sagebrush (*Artemisia californica*)
 - Spice Bush (*Calycanthus occidentalis*)
 - Sugar Bush (*Rhus ovata*)
 - Woolly Blue Curls (*Trichostema lanatum*)
 - Yerba Santa (*Eriodictyon californicum*)
- Perennials**
 - Blue Eyed Grass (*Sisyrinchium bellum*)
 - Blue Wild Rye (*Elymus glaucus*)
 - California Fuchsia (*Zauschneria* ssp.)
 - Deer Grass (*Muhlenbergia rigens*)
 - Milkweed (*Asclepias* ssp.)
 - Needlegrasses (*Nassella* ssp.)
 - Wild Lilac (*Ceanothus* ssp.)
 - Yarrow (*Achillea* ssp.)

Coastal Sage Scrub (Rain: 12” – 25”) This is the community from south of San Francisco to just above San Diego. These plants can handle mulch. They also like a spray ever week or so in the summer and fall to wash off the dust.

- Shrubs**
 - Coyote Brush (*Baccharis pilularis*)
 - Bush Lupine (*Lupinus arboreus*)
 - Sages (*Salvia* ssp., such as Black Sage)
 - Matilija Poppy (*Romneya coulteri*)
- Perennials**
 - Our Lord’s Candle (*Yucca whipplei*)
 - Blue Grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*)



**Sequoia Chapter
California Native Plant Society**
A non-profit organization
dedicated to the preservation of
California native flora.
www.cnps-sequoia.org

* Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden at Claremont, CA