

Tips for California Natives

WHY NATIVES?

Save water, lower maintenance, encourage native insects & birds that have evolved with the plants, counteract urban sprawl & exotic monocultures, and have fun watching wildlife!

DISCLAIMER

California has such a rich and varied flora that it is impossible to make a “one rule fits all”. See Resources for details.

SIZE AND SPACING

Native plants often get their drought tolerance through extensive root systems which aren't there when first planted. It is usually better to plant a small, vigorously growing 4” or 1 gallon than a 15 gallon plant. Separate the roots a little bit, to make sure they enter into the native soil, and don't stay in their original root ball. Make sure your new plants are spaced far enough apart so they don't become a maintenance problem through constant pruning. Let them have a more or less natural shape. There will be a lot of space between them at first. Fill these spaces with annual wildflowers for the first years (but at least mulch to conserve moisture & reduce weeds).

IRRIGATION & HYDROZONING

Hydrozoning is a common sense irrigation principle that means “put plants that have similar water requirements together in the same water zone”. This keeps from over or under-watering plants, which contributes to stress or even death. It is helpful if you select plants to grow together that are from the same plant community (like Riparian, which means stream-side, or Oak Grassland). Even drought tolerant plants need supplemental irrigation (drip, hand, or in some cases, spray) for the first 2-3 dry seasons. Remember these are artificially grown in a small pot in nursery soil and there is an establishment period. It is impossible to know exactly how often to water since it depends on so many variables from soil and plant type to sun, wind patterns and time of year. However, there is the brand-new establishing time when the root ball must be kept damp (from 1-3 months), deep, frequent watering during the first summer (perhaps 1-2x/week), less frequent deep watering the 2nd and possibly 3rd summers (perhaps 1x/week to 1x/month).

“NO IRRIGATION ONCE ESTABLISHED”

I am often asked which plants can be removed from irrigation after establishment (typically after 2-3 full rainy seasons). Many Ceanothus (California Lilac), Manzanitas, Sages, Buckwheats are good candidates. Warning: there are some plants which do not like to have wet feet when there are hot temperatures – fungi kill these plants quickly in summer if watered. These are often plants that go dormant in the summer – called obligate summer dormant.

Two lovely native plants that should not be watered in summer when they are established are Woolly Blue Curls and Flannel Bush.

FERTILIZER

Instead of fertilizing, use compost, mycorrhizae (apply to roots when planting) and compost tea. These beneficial fungi and bacteria assist the plants in obtaining all they need from our native soils.

NATIVE PLANT RESOURCES

BOOKS

California Native Gardening, a month by month guide Helen Popper

Growing California Native Plants, Schmidt & Greenberg

California Native Plants for the Garden, Bornstein, Fross, O'Brien

Designing California Native Gardens, Keator & Middlebrook

Care & Maintenance of Southern California Gardens, O'Brien et al

Great for Northern Calif too, but out of print.

MEETINGS/TALKS/ONLINE INFO

California Native Plant Society www.cnps.org

Gardening w/Natives Yahoo Group www.gardeningwithnatives.com

Excellent information for beginner or experienced

FREE TOURS

Going Native Garden Tour in April of each year. Sign up online:

www.goingnativegardentour.org