

Oops! The Windy Delta Native Garden
by
Carolee James

After moving from Tuolumne County to the eastern side of the San Francisco Bay Delta region, I decided to design my new landscape using Master Gardener principles, adapting California natives to a new-to-me environment. In my May article, I reported that most of the native plants planted in my Oakley garden in February and March were doing well, with just a few apparent casualties.

Alas, I am here to report that the late planting of natives in this locale was not a good decision. The reason for that is the wind. When I chose this home I had no idea how windy the area was. By mid-June the daily winds were constantly whipping through the yard like mini-hurricanes, and by the end of July the leaves of many plants were so desiccated that I feared all would be lost. (I have been told by local folks that this was one of the worst hot, windy seasons in years.)

The first to suffer the hot winds and full sun was my collection of Japanese maples. Even daily watering could not save the trees from the onslaught of the winds. In August I relocated all but five to my daughter's home in Morgan Hill. I'm happy to report that they all have benefited from the non-windy, shady environment and have begun to re-leaf.

Not so lucky were the following deceased plants: one of two flannel bushes (*Fremontodendron*); one of two golden currants (*Ribes aureum*); three mountain spirea (*Spirea densiflora*); three Emerald Carpet manzanitas (*Arctostaphylos*) and seven of the eight hollyleaf cherry (*Prunus ilicifolia*). These native shrubs normally should have been planted in fall, given water once after planting and then be allowed to settle in with the rains. However, the rains came late in March and even with some subsequent watering the plants never made the adjustment. Then the winds just finished them off.

My main error in planting this garden was not planting in the fall, something that I have preached ever since becoming a member of the California Native Plant Society some eleven years ago! Then I made two more errors. One was not planting trees throughout the yard to provide some shade and the other was not installing an irrigation system. Both these errors have or will be rectified. A drip irrigation system was installed in August and trees will be planted within the next month. The drip system provided an immediate turnaround for the struggling plants. My erratic hand-watering was just not doing the job.

The rest of the natives that are now doing well and are receiving regular water are: three mountain mahogany (*Cercocarpus betuloides*); three desert willow (*Chilopsis linearis*); one Western redbud (*Cercis occidentalis*); two Western spicebush (*Calycanthus occidentalis*); one creek dogwood (*Cornus sericea*); four coffeeberry (*Rhamnus californica* ssp. *tomentella*) and three coyote bush (*Baccharis pilularis*). Other survivors include a woolly blue curls (*Trichostema lanatum*); a bush poppy (*Dendromecon rigida*); a creeping snowberry (*Symphoricarpos mollis*) and two service berry (*Amelanchier pallida*). The list goes on: a California wild rose (*Rosa*

californica); a California wild grape (*Vitis californica*), and several species of salvias, penstemons, California fuchsias (*Zauschneria*) and buckwheats (*Eriogonum*).

The grasses planted were: blue and red fescues (*Festuca idahoensis* and *Festuca rubra*); deer grass (*Muhlenbergia rigens*) and Pacific reed grass (*Calamagrotis nutkaensis*) which are showing that they are strong growers in this climate, if provided with regular water.

While I'm happy to report now that most of the natives planted in February and March are doing well, I still will advocate that fall is and will always be the optimum time to plant natives in California. If I could do my yard over, I would have created a nursery and cared for the plants until autumn, when they would be "installed" in the ground. I would have planted a few trees right after moving in. I would have waited to see what the spring and summers were like in this area. I would have done more research on weather patterns. I would be prepared to install irrigation before planting. A lot of "would haves" but the reality is that the deed is done and now I must move on.

As stated earlier, I will be planting trees, and after the fall native plant sale, more natives. This year, the natives will all be in the ground by the first of November. And I vow to practice what I preach!

Carolee James gives talks on planting natives and always stresses to plant in the fall, advice she will heed herself in the future.