



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Native Plants in Home Garden (February 24, 2024)

by Anne Skinner, Tulare/Kings Counties Master Gardener

The variety of native plants in California makes them an excellent choice for a drought-tolerant garden. Most of them are less prone to pest and disease problems and are pollinator-friendly. There are plants for each micro-climate here in our area. Just like us, they have an affinity for a specific location, much like ours, in seeking new real estate.

Sources for native plant information

Lucky for us, there are many online sources and books on native plants and their care, in addition to gardens to view established plants. Starting with a website or book with pictures of the plants in bloom or fully leafed out is the most fun way to get started. Native plants come in an array of colors, textures, shapes, and sizes. Size can be an important aspect to consider; many native plants have a considerable spread in width, with a 6-8 foot spread not being unusual.

Calscape (<https://calscape.org/>) has a useful tool to enter your address and see what plants are native to your area. Las Pilitas Nursery (<https://laspilitas.com>) has an online store with pictures.

Or visit a botanical garden that specializes in native plants, such as Clovis Botanical Garden, Theodore Payne Native Plant Garden, or Santa Barbara Botanic Garden.



Plants tested at Bee Biology Research Facility, UC Davis. Photos: Ola Lundin

Research prior to shopping is wise.

Plant shopping is a major temptation for gardeners, and the plants are primed to tease you into buying them. Researching the plants that will do well on your site and their requirements will focus your shopping and make for better outcomes in the garden. Native plants are generally drought tolerant, but some are native to shade, have specific growing conditions, or prefer wet areas. Some native plants are toxic if eaten, a concern with children, pets, and domestic animals. Nurseries often pot plants in a soil-less mix, which allows water to drain very quickly, and many water their plants regularly. If you take the plant home and set it out in the sun without regular watering, it may fade and die. Ensure smooth home life by asking how the plants at the Nursery are packaged for sale and how they have been watered.

When to plant your new friends in the garden

As a general rule, fall or early spring is the best time to plant shrubs, small plants, or trees. The fall ground is still warm, there is a reasonable amount of sunlight, and the winter rains will allow for the establishment of a good root system. Seeds and bulbs may require special handling or timing to achieve the best results. Some native plant seeds are designed to be "processed" by passing through the digestive system of birds or other animals. There are techniques to break down the heavy seed coating to enhance the germination of the seed kernel inside. Again, it is best to research your plants' usual situation and how to mimic it for the best success.

The first season after planting does require some attention.

Even plants that will triple in width by the end of the season take time to get established. A garden area of native plants will need to be weeded regularly, especially the first spring. Depending on the amount of winter rain, newly planted natives will need regular watering their first year. Check the soil moisture near the plant with a moisture meter a couple of times a week initially. Watering deeply but infrequently encourages a strong, deep root system, which will let the plant survive our hot summers with less water overall. Allow the soil to dry between watering; consistently wet soil will often cause the plant to die outright. There are some exceptions, such as bladderpods (*Isomeris arborea*), which require no attention after planting. It can survive on winter rain alone and just needs intruding weeds kept under control.

Concerns with the use of native plants

In some seasons, the plants might not look like a well-tended garden. It is wise to research the bloom and growing season for each native plant. The wide variety of plants means you can plan for flowering plants from spring to fall and interplant with evergreens, which is optimal for pollinators who need a continuous food source. Plants may be native to California or a Mediterranean climate, but they are opinionated about location in your garden. Grouping native plants according to their water, soil, and sun/shade needs is key. Overwatering is the primary culprit in native plant death in gardens. Some native plants can be mixed in with more moderate water use plants or used near lawn areas, but research on the native plants' requirements is essential for growing success with natives. Native plants often become established with a major tap root, so it is wise to plan their location carefully and not attempt to move them once established. The tap root causes them to generally require less water and are very helpful in reducing soil erosion on a slope.

Native plants can be more expensive; access is limited; they are not usually mass-produced by growers and require special handling to become a sellable size. Although they can be a little more expensive initially, in a perennial garden setting, they can end up more cost-effective, as they are long-lived and many spread substantially from their original size.

Determining the source of failure to thrive in native plants

Even though you researched the plant's favorite location, drought tolerance, and climate of origin, it did not survive. What's next? Did anything change in your garden- a tree taken down, a new fence creating shade, a new pet sampling, or being indiscreet in the vicinity? Particularly with native plants, a hidden problem, such as a broken underground irrigation line, maybe soaking its root system. If a plant dies, it is smart to dig it up to check the development of the root system. Did the roots spread at all after planting? Also, check the planting hole; is it dry or wet and foul smelling? An overly saturated soil will prevent the roots from being able to exchange oxygen, and the plant will die.

Are native plants worth some extra effort? Absolutely!

Native plants have character, with various bloom times, textures, and colors. Once established, their water use and care are significantly less than other types of plant material. Beneficial insects and pollinators will be delighted to visit your garden. Most native plants are less prone to pest damage and invite beneficial insects. You will find little need for pest control other than a spray of water over the leaves to disrupt any invaders. Native plants are Central Valley-style sustainable gardening at its best!

The Tulare-Kings Counties Master Gardeners will answer your questions in person:

Visalia Farmer's Market, 1st & 3rd Saturdays, 8 - 11 am, Tulare Co. Courthouse North parking lot

Questions? Call the Master Gardeners:

Tulare County: (559) 684-3325, Tues & Thurs, 9:30-11:30

Kings County: (559) 852-2736, Thursday Only, 9:30-11:30 am

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