

# 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 chaparral 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!

**At the nursery.** Buy plants that don't have roots coming out of the bottom of the pot. Growth above the pot should be reasonable for the size of pot. Imagine a root structure equivalent to about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of what's above. Select the plant whose root structure fits comfortably in the pot and is not crowded.

**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. Never water in the heat of the day even if the plant is showing signs of stress. Doing so can kill the plant.
- 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!!*

## Native Plant Communities

Select native plants that grow naturally in the same plant community. Central Valley and adjacent foothill gardens can use plants from a number of communities.

You can try to simulate any plant community but the least work is with those that closely match the climate, soil, and rainfall of your area. This page is indebted to the Las Pilitas Web site and Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden publications.

### Central Oak Woodland (Avg. rain: 11"-30")

Works for much of the Fresno area and the foothills.

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



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

[www.cnps-sequoia.org](http://www.cnps-sequoia.org)

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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.

Browse through books, ask questions of others who grow natives, and read the Las Pilitas Web site ([www.laspilitas.com](http://www.laspilitas.com)) for more extensive plant lists and for a general education on California's native plants.

Plant communities do not have hard boundaries. They merge and transition as the climate, soil, and rainfall present opportunities. Some plants cross into different communities. Generally if the same plant is found in both drier and

wetter areas, it will appreciate some regular water. ("Regular" is no more than once per week in the summer, once the plant is established. Sometimes it's once a month.)

Plants within a community doesn't mean they can be always be planted next to one another. Each has its own soil and water tolerances in the overall community. Learn the plant's needs before planting it.

What about planting natives with non-natives? This 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.

### Chaparral (Avg. annual rain: 12"-35")

From along the coast to our local western foothills to So. California mountains. Keep them cleaned of dead limbs and debris. Remove weedy, non-native grasses.

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

### Valley Grassland (Avg. annual rain: 7"-35")

Valley grasslands are characterized by shallow soils, grasses, annual flowers, and forbs.

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

### Creosote Bush Scrub (Avg. rain: 2"-10")

Dominant around towns in the Mojave. Hardy plants that survive climate extremes. Our climate is less harsh but many plants work well. They evolved on little water and well-drained soil. Rock mulch works well.

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

### 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.

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

### Riparian Areas

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

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