



Audubon at Home in California

How to Plant and Maintain Native Plants



San Diego Audubon Society

Growing native plants and using healthy garden practices is not difficult or costly. The first time you see birds and butterflies drawn to the natural habitat in your yard, you will realize the benefits of using native plants and environmentally sound practices.

Plant Selection

The first step in planting native vegetation is selecting the appropriate plant species for your location. Most native plant nurseries have a catalog/planting guide or website that gives specific information on the plants they sell. This includes such things as sun exposure, water needs, soil type and mature plant size for each species. Select a species and site in your yard that best fits the parameters listed in the planting guide. Also, note that there are numerous subspecies available for many of the native species. (For example, the Tree of Life Nursery lists 44 varieties of Ceanothus or California lilac.) The basic idea is to replicate the environment in which the plant would naturally grow. If you use native plants that would not naturally occur in your immediate area, it will be necessary to provide the missing elements, such as supplemental water, soil type or shade.

Planting Season

Winter is springtime for most Southern California native plants. November through February is the best time to put native plants in the ground. Seasonal rains spur new growth in both the roots and the leafy vegetation. Planting at other times of year can be done, but the risk losing the plant due to over or under watering is greater.

Planting Technique

This is the general technique for plant native species in Southern California.

- Dig a hole about half again as large as the pot. (Almost all the plants come in 1-gallon pots. Most natives grow quite rapidly so it's not necessary to pay extra for the 5-gallon pot.)
- Fill the hole with water and let it percolate into the soil - twice. (If the water is very slow to drain you may have clay soil, which some plants do not tolerate.)
- Don't add fertilizers when using native plants.
- Adjust the depth of the hole such that the plant stem is even with, or slightly above, the surrounding soil - about 1/4 inch higher. Do not loosen the roots of the plant very much before putting it in the hole. Three shallow vertical grooves equally spaced on the side of the root ball will do. If the roots are tightly curled around the bottom of the pot, untangle them enough to allow the roots to grow away from the root ball.
- Backfill with the soil previously removed, watering as you go to insure there are no air pockets or dry areas. Tamp lightly and water thoroughly.

- Add 2-3 inches of mulch around the planting area but not around the stem of the plant. If planting during the winter rainy season, you can delay adding the mulch until spring. Adding a few rocks around the plant will give it a natural touch.
- Follow the watering plan recommended by the nursery or reference source, especially during the first summer.

Maintenance

Generally, native plants require very little maintenance, other than fall pruning, to look attractive. Many of the sages can be cut back by as much as 1/4 in the fall to keep them compact. However, species of ceanothus can be killed if pruned too severely. California fuchsia should be cut back to one-inch stubs in January to remove the dead and rangy growth from the previous year. To learn the best pruning techniques for your plants, refer to native plant books, use resources from the Internet or ask the nursery where you purchased the plants.

Most, but not all, natives have very few insect or disease problems in their natural environment. Young toyon plants, for instance, are susceptible to fungal pathogens but once established are long-lived and very attractive. Check resource material to learn more. Recent issues of the Sunset Western Garden Book have plant selection guides that include native plants as well as information on how to deal with various disease problems.

The use of pesticides should be avoided since many beneficial insects will be killed along with the pests. Birds can also be harmed by the use of chemical controls in the garden. Often the real problem is weakened plants that are in the wrong location or are not getting adequate water. If it is necessary to use chemicals, select the least toxic and most environmentally safe alternatives. Follow the directions carefully.

Watering

Newly planted native species usually require watering during the first summer or two. The easiest way to tell if they need a drink is to purchase a ground moisture meter and check the root zone. A low reading is acceptable for most Southern California native plants. Another method is to dig a couple inches deep into the soil around the plant and see if it is still moist. If it's dry, go ahead and water. Overhead watering, micro sprays and hand watering with a garden hose are all acceptable. Drip irrigation is another alternative, but after a year or two the plant's root structure will expand beyond the wetted area. Also, you may find it difficult to reach the emitters and hose lines for maintenance because most native vegetation grows rapidly and covers the irrigation lines.

The water requirements for mature native plants vary greatly. Many of the species in the coastal sage scrub community go dormant in late summer and can easily be killed by over watering. As the sages and other species start to dry out and look thirsty, resist the urge to give them a big drink. A modest watering about once a month will help these species look fresher during the dry summers and get the dust off the foliage.

A critical element in creating a successful native plant garden is to group plants by their water needs. Don't put a thirsty riparian species next to a sage that likes dry summers unless you plan on doing a lot of watering by hand. The same consideration applies to the sunlight and shade needs of the plants.