UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
Agriculture and Natural Resources | UC Master Gardener Program

I Planted California Natives: What Do I Do in March?

Water

Although we've had some rain, during March dry spells you'll need to water regularly to help prepare plants for the summer ahead. Regularly check soil moisture in the rootball of new plants, as well as the surrounding soil. The surface of the soil may appear dry but the soil at the roots may be moist. Check with your finger or use a moisture meter. If the soil at root level is dry, go ahead and water. If it is moist, wait until it dries out to water. Wetland plants need regular irrigation unless they are located where there is natural moisture. For more information on keeping your plants hydrated, check out the California Native Plant Society's tips on watering native plants.

Prune

After flowering is finished, pinch back California Lilac or Ceanothus (*Ceanothus* species), Coffeeberry (*Frangula* species), and Manzanita (*Arctostaphylos* species) during dry weather. Pinching back means removing only the growth tips of the plant to encourage the lower buds along the branches to grow and give the shrub a leafier, denser appearance.

For Ceanothus, remove dried flower clusters to promote a denser growth habit. If you overlook pinching, you will eventually see long sections of stem without any leaves or branches. The plant will also benefit from light tip-pruning of new growth at this time.

Coffeeberry can be pinched or pruned at any time but it's best to do when the plant is rapidly growing in the spring so the new foliage will quickly cover up the pruning cuts.

Manzanitas may be pruned after they flower up until early summer. Pruning needs of individual manzanitas vary. Groundcover Manzanitas require very little pruning. Pinch unbranched stems as needed after flowering. Young shrub Manzanitas may be pinched or lightly headed back in March or April to promote denser growth. Wait until early summer to prune large shrub or small tree Manzanitas to remove dead wood and reveal sculptural trunks and branches.

A few California natives tolerate shearing or hedging such as Coyote Brush, Hollyleaf Cherry, Lemonade Berry, Pacific Wax Myrtle, Spiny Redberry, and Yankee Point Ceanothus.

Plant

Spring is still a good time to plant natives, especially along a pond, creek or other moist area. Consider Blue-eyed Grass (*Sisyrinchium bellum*), rushes (*Juncus* species), sedges (*Carex* species), or Yerba Mansa (*Anemopsis californica*). Watch for upcoming plant sales held by local botanical gardens and non-profits.

If you live a mile or more from the coast, you can also begin planting milkweed, the host plant for the larva of the Western Monarch Butterfly, in March. Winter dormant native milkweeds are recommended to prevent disruptions in the butterfly's winter dormancy period and avoid spreading disease. Seeds or plants of Narrow Leaf Milkweed (*Asclepias fascicularis*) are widely available. You may be able to find seeds or plants of Showy Milkweed (*Asclepias speciosa*) or Woollypod Milkweed (*Asclepias eriocarpa*), also native to this area. The Santa Monica Mountains Fund Milkweed Planting and Care Tips answers your questions on how to grow this vital habitat plant successfully. If you live within a mile of the beach, plant nectar plants instead of milkweed.

Written by Marilyn Whitford, VCMG Class of 2022
Reviewed by Emma Volk, Ventura County Master Gardener Advisor

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Sow

If you sow annual wildflower seeds now, you can extend your floral display through summer and the beginning of fall. You'll need to provide regular water while the seedlings are popping up and intermittent water to keep the plants looking good over the summer. Some of the easiest to grow are California Poppy (*Eschscholzia californica*), Clarkia species and Blue Field Gilia (*Gilia capitata*). Sow Bird's Eye Gilia (*Gilia tricolor*) in dry, open areas and Baby Blue Eyes (*Nemophila menzieii*) in moist locations. If you sow Purple Chinese Houses (*Collinsia heterophylla*) in light shade, they may bloom in September.

Mulch

Leave the leaves. Evergreen California native shrubs such as Ceanothus, Coffeeberry, Manzanita and Toyon drop leaves occasionally and form their own mulch. You can add seedheads and trimmings from Buckwheat, Sage and Yarrow and other plants that can provide food and nesting material for birds. Skip the top dressing in areas where you spread wildflower seeds since the seeds need light to germinate. Leave a patch or two of bare ground for native bees to form nests.

Clean up

Weed your yard when the seedlings are large enough to identify but before they can set seed. Be on the lookout for California Burclover, Creeping Woodsorrel (*Oxalis corniculata*), Scarlet Pimpernel, and Spurge. If you're unsure whether a seedling is a weed or a wildflower, see if you can identify the plant using the UC IPM Weed Photo Gallery. After the recent rains the soil may still be soft enough to pull the weeds by hand. If not, use your favorite weeding tool such as a notch tip weeder, a hori hori knife, or a stand-up weed puller.

Learn how to reduce your home's wildfire risk and more at the UC Master Gardeners of Ventura County resource page: Firewise Living. This page lists several links to help you garden in a fire-prone area.

Online Resources mentioned in this article

Calscape.org: Watering Native Plants
https://calscape.org/watering-native-plants

Milkweed Planting and Care Tips

https://samofund.org/milkweed/#Milkweed-Planting-and-Care-Tips

UC IPM: Weed Photo Gallery
https://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/weeds_intro.html

Master Gardener Workshop: Firewise Living: From Structure to Landscape
https://ucanr.edu/site/uc-master-gardeners-ventura-county/firewise-living

References

O'Brien, Bart, Betsey Landis, and Ellen Mackey. Care & Maintenance of Southern California Native Plant Gardens. Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, Los Angeles California. Claremont, CA: Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden, 2006. (out of print)
Popper, Helen. California Native Plant Gardening: A Month-by-Month Guide. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2012. Available for loan from the Ojai Library (hard copy) and the Blanchard Community Library, Santa Paula (hard copy and eBook).

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