

From the UC Master Gardener Program of Contra Costa County

NEWS to GROW BY



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Fall is the best time to plant California native plants

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Our cooler weather and winter rains give plants time to develop the healthy root systems they need to survive our warm, dry summers. To make the



best choices for your garden it is important to know your garden conditions, learn which plants grow in those conditions, and know how to care for your plants throughout the year.

All native plants grow best in soils and climate conditions similar to those where they

evolved. For Contra Costa County that may be the oak woodlands and chaparral of the inner valleys, coastal scrub and prairie grasslands along the Bay, riparian woodlands along creeks, or sand dunes near Antioch.

Before you start purchasing and planting your natives this fall, think about your garden area, learn about local plants, and decide how you want to garden.

And remember, unlike common hybridized plants found in big box stores and local nurseries, California's flora is **dormant in the summer** and **grows during**

colder wet winter and spring months. Over watering California natives during our hot summer months can kill the plant.

1. KNOW YOUR GARDEN CONDITIONS:

Once you've decided you'd like to plant some native plants, carefully examine your garden site.

Will you be planting in full sun on a southern or western exposure, or in shade under trees or along a building?

Do you have heavy clay soil, rocky soil or sandy soils?

Are you planting in a dry area with little to no irrigation, or in an area with irrigation or where you regularly hand water?

Do you live along the coast, bay or delta? Or are you in a hot inland valley without trees?

Do you live in a woodland area with natural creeks? Or have a high-water table with boron salts?

Keep this list of your garden's characteristics handy as you explore which plants will thrive in your garden.



2. KNOW YOUR PLANTS

It is easy to be seduced by glowing descriptions and professional glamor shots of native plants in online or print catalogs, and later to be disappointed by how those same plants look in your home garden the following year.



A knowledgeable horticulturist may be able to grow natives from all areas of the state by manipulating their environments, but it is hard for a home gardener to modify a garden's soil, moisture, light and temperature to meet native California plants' cultural requirements. It is much easier,

cheaper and satisfying to grow those plants suited to your geographic area and climate.

Luckily, there is an easy way to find the right plants for your garden. Calscape.org, a California Native Plant Society [CNPS] website for home gardeners, will give you a list of trees, bulbs, vines, annuals, perennials, shrubs and grasses observed growing naturally near your home. Those same plants also are broken into categories for sun, shade or light shade; dry soil, damp soil, very low and moderately watered soils; and, my favorite, [“very easy”](#) to grow plants.

To use Calscape.org, just type in your garden address. After reviewing the lists for your address, review your garden characteristics and start looking at the plants.

As an example, using our demonstration “My Garden” in Walnut Creek, Calscape.org listed 298 plants in 21 categories, including: 24 trees, 44 shrubs, 183 sun plants, 33 for shade, 53 very low water plants and over 200 perennials and annuals.

Once you find a plant you like that is listed under a general category that matches your garden's characteristics, click on the photo of the plant to learn whether it is suitable for your location.

After you click on the plant name and photo, Calscape.org takes you to a profile of that plant. The typical profile includes several photos; a map of California displaying the plant's estimated range and documented occurrences; and a detailed description of the plant, its size, form, growth rate, flower color and

flowering season with an easy to understand chart. A wildlife supported section lists birds, butterflies and moths associated with the plants.

For the home gardener, an invaluable chart of '[Landscaping Information](#)' with graphics details important cultural requirements, including how much summer irrigation to provide, maintenance tips, common plant uses, and companion planting advice. The final [Natural Setting](#) section describes the type of site and climate favored by the plant.

Once you have decided which plants you'd like to try, [Calscapes.org](#)'s plant profile provides a list and website links to nurseries that carry that plant. Having all this information organized in easy to understand graphics with links saves hours of time in researching native plants for your home garden.



Once you know your garden's characteristics and have chosen which plants are most likely to survive at your location, you're ready for the final decisions

3. KNOW YOUR GARDENING STYLE



After you know your garden's horticultural conditions, and have chosen plants you like that can thrive in your garden, think about your gardening style. Are you a gardener who needs a neat and tidy garden without dry leaves on plants or on the ground? Or are you able to relax with a natural, more sprawling and less controlled look?

Do you want to irrigate everything regularly or can you adjust your watering system to avoid regular watering for those plants that have low water requirements?

Do you want to bring in the native bees, insects and birds with a garden full of color, seeds and movement? Or are you more content with a sculptured organized layout?

Do you have a hired gardener who will want to prune, fertilize and water every plant?

Can you tolerate or remove the occasional weeds and remove dried up annuals and short-lived perennials?



Although native plants can fit into different gardening styles, it is best to choose those plants that work best for your location, and your garden aesthetic. As always, choose the right plant for the right location by paying attention to each plant's cultural needs. Plants with similar soil, water, and sun requirements,

especially those from the same natural plant communities, can thrive when planted together. Just remember to keep the plants' mature size in mind as you plant.

As we know, gardening with native plants not only brings natural beauty to our homes; it also feeds birds, butterflies and pollinators, saves water and reduces or eliminates the need for pesticides. Perhaps the hardest step is learning which natives to plant.

For inspiration, visit native plant gardens online or in person. We are fortunate to live in an area with many demonstration and botanic gardens. It is easier to

imagine how a native plant will look in your yard once you have seen one growing at a garden or in the wild.

Local gardens with California natives open to the public include:

- [Richmond Dry Garden](#) (UC Contra Costa County Master Gardeners' water-efficient demonstration garden in Richmond);
- [UC Davis Arboretum](#);
- [UC Berkeley Botanical Garden](#);
- [East Bay Regional Park Botanic Garden](#) (a 10-acre free, native plant garden in Tilden Park)

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**Extra feature: Sowing Native Wildflowers**



Spring blooming wildflowers offer a rewarding introduction to growing California natives. The color and beauty of wildflowers bring insects, birds and life into the garden. Seeds can be sown in the ground along garden paths or in deep pots in October before winter rains. Once the seeds germinate and seedlings sprout, it is important to lightly water them during any winter dry spells.

Easy to grow native wildflowers for Contra Costa County include California poppies, clarkias, Chinese Houses and lupines.

**Additional links and resources:**

- <https://ucanr.edu/>
- [California Native Society](#)
- [Calscape – Restore Nature one Garden at a time](#)
- [http://cagardenweb.ucanr.edu/Your\\_Climate\\_Zone/#content](http://cagardenweb.ucanr.edu/Your_Climate_Zone/#content)