

Print Page

California Native Plants on Parade

By Liz Parsons

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With so many groups and types of plants available, gardening choices can be confusing, but a few popular and easily available plants can form the core of the native garden.

Choose trees first, if you can. California native trees are of different sizes with different needs and each will create a different effect. Alder, bay laurel, buckeye, bigleaf maple, and many oak species are native to Sonoma County and do well here.

Ceanothus and manzanita are evergreen shrubs which are very drought tolerant once established. It is important to choose the right variety for a particular garden need. They range from low ground covers to large tree-like shrubs. The most widely planted varieties have dark blue flowers in March and April, others have light blue or even white flowers. The white, urn-like flowers of the manzanita bloom in January and February and its small leaves contrast with its red bark. Other evergreen, drought tolerant shrubs include flannel bush, silk-tassel, bush anemone, matilija poppy, toyon, bush monkeyflowers, and holly-grapes.

The pink flowering currant is a lovely deciduous shrub that blooms in early spring. Shrubby salvias are deer-proof with aromatic foliage. The local Sonoma sage makes a very hardy ground cover. Cleveland's sage and white sage grow taller.

Many herbaceous perennials are available at specialty nurseries and CA native plant sales. Penstemon's spectacular, bell-like flowers, in a wide range of colors, are a knockout. Their rugged, hardy qualities suit western gardens. Sea thrift, a native of our rocky coastal bluffs, can be planted in a border or in rock gardens. Look for a small tuft of grassy leaves with little pom-poms of dark pink flowers dancing 3-4 inches overhead. The red columbine, native to moist shady areas throughout the state, attracts hummingbirds, has lovely fern-like foliage, is adaptable and dependable in the garden, and flowers from May to late summer. The native iris, which also appreciates a little shade, blooms spectacularly in the spring.

In the late summer and through the fall you will see the bright red flowers of the hummingbird fuchsia, or zauschneria. It moves through the ground by underground runners, so give it plenty of room in a hot, dry area. With just a little extra water it will bloom until the frost in November. Western bleeding heart has a lovely springtime show of pink dangling hearts, then goes completely dormant. It moves by fleshy underground roots. The California poppy spreads when ripe seed pods explode, sending potential new plants throughout the garden. It can become rather weedy, so keep it in the wild areas of the garden. Good ground covers for dry shady areas are wild California strawberry, wild ginger, and the redwood sorrel. They will colonize an area and shade out competing weedy species.

Annual wildflowers which make a wonderful springtime show are sold as seeds, best planted with the winter rains. Sky blue lupine, tidy tips, baby blue eyes, meadowfoam, Chinese houses, and Clarkia re-seed themselves in the garden year after year. Remove competing weeds so that the wildflowers can really make a good show.

Native ferns and grasses such as deer grass, California fescue, red fescue, Indian rice grass, and purple needle grass will enhance any garden scene. The ferns that do best in the garden are the sword fern, the wood fern, the five-finger fern, and the giant chain fern.

Liz Parsons is co-president of the Milo Baker Chapter of the California Native Plant Society. She has dedicated many years to educating the public about California's special flora and has written many articles on gardening with native plants. The California Native Plant Society's Milo Baker Chapter will hold its annual plant sale on Oct. 14. For information on monthly meetings, field trips, workshops, etc. see www.cnpsmb.org.

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