

It's Easy to Go Native

By Rachel Oppedahl

In recent columns Tuolumne County Master Gardeners have written about the benefits of landscaping with plants native to the Sierra Nevada Foothills. Natives need less water, few or no soil amendments or fertilizers, and generally present fewer problems with pest infestations and disease. They also do a better job in the long run, of helping native wildlife and pollinators thrive. And if you've experienced the repeated discouragement of trying to grow plants here that really belong in the wetlands or by the beach, you'll appreciate what good company our native greenery can be.

The sad irony is, most of the nurseries we have come to know and love carry a preponderance of non-natives, and the few plants that are "local" aren't typically labeled as such, so who knows? The good news is there are several outstanding, easy-to-use resources available now to research and/or purchase native plants.

The California Native Plant Society (CNPS) has a new tool on their website (cnps.org) that is almost too good to be true. It's called "Calscape," and the link to it is on their homepage. All you do is click on your location — say, Sonora — on their map of California and voilà, you are given all the plants native to your area, with color photos, by category: perennials, annuals, trees, shrubs, grasses, succulents, vines, groundcovers, plants that prefer sun, shade, are drought-tolerant, attract birds and butterflies, etc. They even provide a "storage" spot called "My Plants," where you can create a library of your favorites or the ones you want to try.

I clicked on "perennials" and was presented with color thumbnail photos of 92 different native plants! There were plants that flower in pink, purple, red, orange, yellow and white, which dispels the common myth that natives are boring. And did you know that we have our own, native varieties of asters, columbine, lilies, larkspur and geraniums? I've decided to hunt for several natives on the list just because of their names: "Pearly Everlasting," "Canyon Liveforever" and "Texas Paintbrush." Make use of this wonderful tool at <http://www.sierrafoothillscnps.org>.

All of this talk of going native leads us to another great, timely resource: the twice-a-year plant sale (spring and fall) hosted by the Sierra Foothills Chapter of CNPS. The fall sale will be held on Saturday, October 24, from 9 am to 12 noon at Rocca Park on Main Street in Jamestown. Word to the wise: get there early if you want the best selection of plants. CNPS members will be on hand to answer your questions. If you can't make the plant sale, contact our local chapter of CNPS by visiting their website. Seasoned native-plant gardeners in the society can help you purchase from the best seed or plant sources.

Another resource for learning about native plants is the Tuolumne County Master Gardeners, who maintain a demonstration garden in downtown Sonora that contains many native plants. If you'd like to visit the garden before winter sets in, come to the last "Open Garden Day" of the season on Saturday, November 7, from 10:00 am to 1:00 pm. The demonstration garden is located at 251 S. Barretta Street. You can also learn more about native plants and all manner of gardening topics at the Master Gardener website:

http://ucanr.edu/sites/Tuolumne_County_Master_Gardeners/

Because fall is the best time to introduce new plants to your garden, this is a great time to invest in easy-to-grow native plants that will color your world for years to come. Just imagine yourself next spring: instead of spending countless hours and money coaxing finicky exotic plants (and lawns) to survive, you could be sipping iced tea and taking in the wonderful view of native plants in your garden.

Rachel Oppedahl is a University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener of Tuolumne County who is going native a little bit more every year.