

Wildscaping

by Becky Miller-Cripps

In a conversation with my photographer son, we marveled at the indigenous and endemic—existing only in this area—plant species in California. He has camped and backpacked through Sequoia/Kings Canyon (Seki) National Park, amazed at the giant trees.

Sequoiadendron giganteum, the largest trees in the world, grow only in a narrow band along the western side of the north/central Sierra Nevada as far south as Tulare County. Coast redwoods, *Sequoia sempervirens*, grow only in foggy climates along the northern California and Oregon coast, or where there is sufficient summer rain.

So, too, rolling hillsides of oak savanna are characteristic of a specific elevation, climate, temperature and precipitation zone. Populated by blue, valley, black, white, coastal, canyon or interior live oaks, oak woodland is a sure indicator of native California landscape. The gold-brown hills with their dark-green-to-black bands of oaks provide unique California summer beauty.

In a University of California Division of Agriculture and National Resources report, the Integrated Hardwood Range Management Program (now the UC Oaks program at UC Berkeley) states that Tuolumne County possesses 234,000 acres of oak woodland. Of the 41 California counties containing oak woodland, only 15 counties contain more oak acreage than Tuolumne. However, in the last 45 years, 1 million acres of California oak woodland have fallen to development. Valley oaks, the largest of California oaks, with their graceful branches sweeping the ground, are endemic to California. According to Trees and Shrubs of California, “valley oak is considered an uncommon species, largely because of loss of habitat to agriculture and urbanization.” Clearly, these species, indicators of the less-urban lifestyle we value in the foothills, are a resource we can’t afford to squander.

Why, then, do we insist on destroying our unique foothill plants, only to replace them with exotics from other places requiring enormous amounts of water, fertilizer, and pesticides? Our family has a standing joke that development removes native plants and geologic features identifying an area, then names the replacement generic urban sprawl for whatever is no longer there!

A growing worldwide movement cherishes and protects remaining native habitat, landscaping our private spaces with native plants blending seamlessly into—not damaging or out competing—our native flora. This landscape ethic is referred to as wildscaping. According to “Audubon” writer Susan J. Tweit, wildscaping “aims to restore habitat and honor the character of the site by relying on indigenous plants and those nonnatives adapted to the local conditions and friendly to wildlife. It also avoids the use of pesticides, fertilizer, and supplemental water.”

Check out the UC Oaks website: <https://oaks.cnr.berkeley.edu/>. You’ll find ways to identify the oak trees on your property as well as determining whether your oak tree has a disease.

It's not necessary to plant lawn, vinca major, and ivy under your native oak trees. Not only are Bermuda grass, vinca and ivy invasive, escaping to strangle and replace our native plants, but the required water will someday kill that large oak tree. Consider alternatives such as bare ground or mulch under the oaks, a clump of native grass between two large rocks, or scatters of California poppies that don't require summer water.

If you prefer the more formal look of a hedge, consider planting one of the smaller Manzanita species. They have beautiful bark, flowers, berries, and branching form, but require no summer water once established.

To look at landscape ideas utilizing native California plants, go on-line to <https://www.bewaterwise.com/> and view their beautiful "Gardening with California Natives" page. This information is provided for Southern California residents, but is appropriate for and can be adapted to other California locations.

The next time you visit friends and family in the southland, consider taking a trip to the California Botanic Garden (formerly the Rancho Santa Ana Botanical Garden) in Claremont. It provides tours, classes, and information highlighting native plant species. Some of their ideas will surely work in your garden as well.

Fire Safety Note: Many California native species and non-invasive Mediterranean plants burn readily—adapted to a fire regime. In order to make them more fire safe, be vigilant in pruning out the deadwood that accumulates in the center and lower portions of plants like manzanita and rosemary

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