



Master Gardeners, Fresno County

Living in the foothills...

Advice from Master Gardeners, Ray and Ruth Conner, Oakhurst, CA

Volume 1, Issue 1

Spring 2009

Planting *Cistus* Under Oaks

Majestic oak trees abound in the mountain area around Oakhurst, and while their beauty is appealing, it is always nice to have some shrubs nearby to augment the overall appearance around our homes. Since oaks do not like to have “wet feet” from irrigation during the summer, a drought resistant shrub is required. We are in the zone 7 of hardiness and should consider a plant suitable to our area. Such a plant could be *Cistus* spp., a member of the Cistaceae family. *Cistus*, or rock rose, comes from the Mediterranean area and is sun loving, fast growing, and drought resistant. In fire areas, there is the additional bonus of being fire resistant as well. Having a shallow root system, *Cistus* will not be in competition with the oak whose root system is deeper.

Cistus is deer tolerant and is suitable for planting outside of a fenced area. Oaks sometimes harbor oak root fungus, but *Cistus* is not affected by this malady. In fact, the genus is not frequently affected by disease at all. It is best to plant the shrub about ten feet from the oak’s trunk as a minimum so not to disturb the latter’s root system.

Rockroses come in size from a few inches tall (*C. salvifolius*) to over six feet tall (*C. elma*), however the typical one is about three feet tall (*C. purpureus*). This rounded shrub has sticky, upright, red flushed shoots, and narrow, oblong, lance shaped, wavy margined dark green leaves that grow to two inches long. In summer, the plant produces cymes of flowers about three inches across. These are crinkled and dark pink with maroon marks at the base of the petals. The flowers themselves are five petaled and usually last but one day. The profusion of blooms during the summer months is striking however. These shrubs may be situated in a rocky area ten to fifteen feet apart to produce a striking flash of color.

The land around many oak trees in our area is clayish, and has to be amended. Compost, well-rotted manure, or green fertilizer work well. Until *Cistus* is established, watering on a timely basis is essential. This will assure that the plant will remain healthy and grow vigorously. While nutrients are important in the growth and health of the plant, it is prudent not to use nitrogen unless really necessary. Nitrogen encourages the growth of the leaves and branches at the expense of the flowers. You can verify your soil nutrient level with a soil test but most soils in our area have plenty of nutrients.

Whether a protective screen is used around the root system to deter gophers is one’s preference. The hole should be about two times the size of the root ball in diameter and just deep enough to have the roots covered. After filling the hole, make a dyke around the *Cistus* to hold the water.

Enjoy the added beauty that *Cistus* can give your landscape.



Cistus purpureus—Photo by Linda Dodge, UC Davis