

**UC MASTER GARDENER PROGRAM  
OF SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY**



The UC Master Gardener Program is a public service and outreach program under the University of California Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources (UC ANR), administered locally by participating UC Cooperative Extension offices (UCCE). Our mission is to extend research based knowledge and information on home horticulture, pest management, and sustainable landscape practices to the residents of California.

**NATIVE PLANTS: Cultural Practices**

**Choosing the right plant:** California native plants comprise a spectrum of plant communities: chaparral, coastal, forest, and desert scrub, to name a few. As such, their soil, sun and water requirements can be quite different. Choosing plants from the same native plant communities will increase the likelihood that they will grow well together in your yard, and will simplify maintenance. Plant selection should also take into account plants that are best suited for your yard's environment.

**Site selection - site, soil and slope:** Know which plants fit your landscape's soil, sun and site conditions - sandy vs clay, shade vs sun, flat vs slope.

**Planting:** The best time to plant is in the fall just as the rains begin. Planting during other seasons can be successful but plants will require more care to get established.

- Dig planting hole 30% wider than the plant, but just deep enough so the top of the root ball is even with or ¼ to ½ inch above the surrounding ground. You can loosen the soil on the sides of the planting hole but leave the base of the hole firm and undisturbed.
- Make sure the plant's root ball is moist before removing from the container. Place the plant in the center of hole and spread out the roots. Fill the hole with the same native soil that was removed and do not add amendments or fertilizer. Gently tamp soil around the plant to eliminate air pockets. Create an irrigation basin by using extra soil to form a raised berm just outside the perimeter of the planting hole.
- Water the plant thoroughly and spread 1-2 inches of mulch around the plant, taking care to keep bark away from the crown in order to prevent crown rot.

**Key Points on Irrigation of Native Plants:**

- How you irrigate is the single most important factor to consider when planting a native landscape.
- Not all native plants do best with little or no water. Although many are drought tolerant and may require summer drought conditions, plants native to wet environments will need summer water.
- Native plants are not drought tolerant before they are established. All native plants will need regular irrigation for first year or two until they have established root systems.
- If in doubt, err on side of not watering; it is easier to wet dry soil than to dry out soggy soil.
- Water on cool cloudy days or early morning or evening.
- Crown rot and plant death can occur if soil is kept damp, if mulch is touching the crown of the plant, or if a drip irrigation emitter is placed directly adjacent to plant's crown. Low flow micro sprinklers, which deliver low volume of water and wet a larger area away from the plant's crown, may be best option for irrigation.

- Water natives during winters with low rainfall as this is the period when they are normally exposed to increased soil moisture. Summer irrigation can cause activation of soil fungi which thrive in moist warm conditions and cause crown and root rot.
- Do not automate your irrigation schedule. Instead, monitor soil moisture, learn the water requirements for your plants, and water accordingly.
- A soil moisture meter, available at hardware and nursery stores for as little as \$10, can be helpful in monitoring the irrigation needs of your plants. Do not water if the soil is already moist. Clay soil can appear dry on surface but be damp at root level. If soil is dry, slowly water with 3-5 gallons to avoid runoff.

### **General Watering Guidelines for Newly Planted Native Plants:**

- Newly planted natives need slow deep watering rather than shallow fast irrigation.

### **Year One**

- For the first month, water every 3-4 days depending on the weather. Do not let the soil dry out during this initial period; keep moist, but not wet.
- From the second month until the rainy season (through the first summer), water once a week, depending on weather and the water holding capacity of your soil as determined by your water meter. Let the soil dry some between watering; if the soil is moist, wait a day or so and check again. During fall and winter, if rainfall is scant, water once a month.

### **Year Two**

- Spring and summer: Irrigate to keep plants alive about every 2 to 4 weeks.
- Fall and winter: Water only once per month if rainfall is below normal.
- After the second summer, most natives will be established. Those that are drought tolerant will need no supplemental water except during dry winters. Non-drought tolerant natives will need continued supplemental irrigation, so know your plant's requirements.

### **References**

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**UC MASTER GARDENERS 2156 SIERRA WAY, SUITE C SAN LUIS OBISPO, CA 93401** email: [anrmgslo@ucanr.edu](mailto:anrmgslo@ucanr.edu)

GARDENING QUESTIONS? ASK THE MASTER GARDENERS AT HELPLINE: 805-781-5939



Website: Master Gardeners San Luis Obispo

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