



Is there a problem in your garden?

by Sue Rideout & Patty Weeks, Master Gardeners

Most gardeners, both experienced and novice alike, have at times looked at their landscapes and said, “Hmmm, something’s not quite right in this spot.” The balance is wrong with tall plants overshadowing shorter ones; the colors clash; one plant is getting too much water and another not enough; etc. We Master Gardeners maintain a demonstration garden of California native and other drought tolerant plants along Millcreek at West Main Street and Fairway Drive and we too have encountered this problem.



California carpenteria

A piece of the garden between the street and the garden path needs some rethinking. It is a prominent section viewed by passersby and it is just kind of ... ugly. A tall grass-like plant called Rush, installed when the garden was first developed, was fairly small at the time but over the years it has multiplied and grown to 4' by 4', much too large for this space. It acts as a wall to the garden, not an invitation to come in and enjoy! This rush is planted under a Valley Oak tree and the leaves from the oak get trapped in the shoots of the grass and are difficult to rake out. But even worse, it blocks the sprinkler in this section so the surrounding plants don't get enough water.

It is pretty obvious that the Rush is not working in this situation. The solution is to tear it out, a task many gardeners (including us) find difficult to do to a healthy plant. Perhaps it can be moved to a more suitable location or given to another gardener but out it must go.



Salvia Greggii

Now we are left with an area 5' by 13' with only two existing plants, another Rush that we have divided down to a much smaller size and a native buckwheat which forms a clump 3' high with narrow leaves and white or pinkish flowers in small clusters from spring to early fall. The buckwheat is a great habitat plant for butterflies, birds, and bees. It is also a good insectary plant which means it attracts good bugs to the garden that, in turn, eat the bad bugs. These plants need only sun, good drainage and very little water to be beautiful.

When redesigning this area we need to keep several things in mind. First this space is viewed from two sides, the street and the garden path so we need to treat it like an island and have interest on both sides. We need to have a plant or two that are higher in the middle but do not block the view into the other side of the garden and the creek beyond. We'll want some medium size plants and perhaps even some low growing succulents to finish off the edges.

Also everything we add must be drought tolerant because this garden receives water only once or twice a week during the summer and none at all in the winter months. We may need to hand water a few times during this first hot summer but that's small price to pay for the beauty we'll be creating. After the first year the new plants should be able to survive on infrequent watering.

A quick online search tells us that are many good companion plants for the remaining buckwheat. We already have in this garden native Pacific Coast Iris, Ceanothus, Fuchsia, Carpenteria Californica, Seaside Daisy, Island Snapdragon, Matilija Poppy, and several salvias. Other new additions could be Wooley Blue Curls (*Trichostema lanatum*) St. Catherine's Lace Buckwheat, Coyote Bush, Yarrow and even more salvias



Butterfly Bush *buddleji*

These are but a few of the drought tolerant flowers and shrubs suitable for this garden's climactic and soil conditions. Our choice will be influenced by availability, budget, plant color and the plants ability to survive in our Zone 9 climate with its hot summers and freezing winters. But as any gardener knows planning and shopping for the landscape is almost as much fun as planting and enjoying its beauty. So off we go on a plant search.

Master Gardeners are in this garden on the third Wednesday morning of every month. If you are curious please stop by and see what we are doing.

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