

NATIVE PLANT SALE HERALDS FALL PLANTING SEASON

by UCCE Master Gardeners Vera Strader and Francie McGowan, based on an original

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Native plants put on the most active growth in cool, fall weather. John Muir correctly observed that, except in the icy mountains, California really has only two seasons – spring and summer. For our native plants, our fall then is really their spring.

The California Native Plant Society's local chapter welcomes the fall planting season with their annual sale. This year it will be held Saturday, October 11th from 9 am to 12 noon at Rocca Park in Jamestown. Central Sierra Audubon will also be selling bird boxes and books.

The native plant growing season begins with the shortening of days, cooling of nights and return of moisture to the air with the first fall rains. With the rains (or assistance from the garden hose) they awaken from their summer dormancy, where survival depended on their ability to shut down, conserve energy and moisture, and hang on. While the days are cooling, the soil is a massive reservoir of heat encouraging plant roots to grow as soon as they have moisture.

We can see the results of this renewal of root growth with the first warm days at the end of January and February's 'false spring'. Ceanothus stretch their branch tips, foothill wild currents (*Ribes*) already start blooming and manzanitas shine with tender, bronzy new growth, early buds and bloom. Even though March tries to spit and squawk out a bit of winter, the natives are undeterred. They grow on, preparing for an extravagant April and May bloom.

By the time June comes, with its long days and introduction to summer's daunting heat, most native plants at this elevation are well on their way to doing what is the ultimate purpose of all flowering plants—to ensure their species survival through seed production. Remember, the flower is just the bribe, the come-on to the pollinator. With seed successfully set, the annual dies and the perennial or shrub rests.

It is interesting to observe how native plants prepare for that period of summer dormancy. Some shed a portion of their leaves—both because there is less work that needs to be done once active growth, flowering and seed set is accomplished, and to conserve moisture. Remaining leaves exhibit defensive strategies by toughening up, whitening to reflect sunlight and concentrating their resins and oils to protect themselves from browsing. This is also how native and Mediterranean plants survive decimation by deer and their like. We need to recognize this and allow our own gardens to slow down and toughen up for summer, and quit encouraging succulent new growth that attracts critters.

Although not much will be blooming at the upcoming native plant sale (for the reasons discussed above), shoppers will find loads of lovely shrubs, trees and perennials. Look for a great variety of California wild lilacs (*Ceanothus*)--from the tall arching 'Dark star' to the tough spreading groundcover 'Anchor Bay'. Shrubs will include deer-proof manzanitas, spice bush (*Calycanthus*), and deer-resistant *Salvia clevelandii*. Trees like the showy western redbud, incense cedar and western dogwood will be on hand along with a good selection of perennials such as penstemons, sulfur buckwheats and the exceptional *Salvia* 'Bee's Bliss' which forms lavender blooms and a dense mat with a four-foot spread. Expect some color from the Hummingbird fuchsia (*Zauschneria*) and hummingbird sage.

Fall is the only time to successfully plant touchy natives like the Matilija poppy (*Romneya coulteri*), and Fremontodendron, which succumb to root rot if watered in the heat of the summer. By planting them in the fall they will be adequately established by next season.

Come early to the sale to find the best selection of drought tolerant and wildlife-sustaining natives for your yard.

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