

Native Plant Myths and Facts

by Vera Strader

We Californians live in a biodiversity hotspot. Our variety of climates—from below sea level to the highest peaks—enables us to host the largest flora of any state in the country. More than a third of California plant species are found nowhere else on the planet! It is these same plants that our wildlife has depended on for countless generations.



This plant and animal diversity is both a gift and a preservation challenge. Unfortunately myths about native plants discourage many from growing them in their yards. Here are six myths along with the facts.

MYTH: Native plants are nothing but brush. **FACT:** Dozens of definitely non-brushy, attractive, easily grown native beauties thrive in foothill gardens, including the delicate columbine, stunning matilija poppy and stately oaks. As awareness grows, more garden-worthy natives are appearing in nurseries and on garden tours.

MYTH: Roadside ditches usually contain native plants. **FACT:** When a neighbor asked me to identify the “natives” growing in her ditch, they turned out to be castor beans (which are poisonous), originally from Africa and of no value to our California wildlife. The plants in ditches are usually exotic (non-native) escapees from nearby gardens or bullying non-native invasives like yellow-flowered Scotch broom, yellow star thistle and grasses such as foxtail and Bermuda.



MYTH: Native plants will take over your yard. **FACT:** Unlike “alien” plants, natives are far more likely to be kept in check by local conditions. Plants from other parts of the world often spread rampantly when they are free of the natural checks and balances, such as the insects, browsing critters, and less hospitable climates found in their homelands. Even nursery-grown exotics can become thugs; periwinkle (*Vinca major*) and English ivy are familiar examples.

MYTH: Natives need no water. **FACT:** Just like non-native plants, natives need regular water while their roots are becoming established during their first year in the yard. Moisture needs thereafter depend on their natural habitat, which can vary from shady, stream-side settings to sizzling hillsides. Many natives are drought tolerant once established and can be quite attractive in our gardens.

MYTH: Learn about native plants by reading gardening magazines and catalogs. **FACT:** Most of the natives featured in catalogs and magazines are native to other parts of the country. Your best bet are plants that are indigenous to our own Foothills. Native plant sales are a good source for local natives.

MYTH: Native plants bring in undesirable bugs. **FACT:** Most insects create only minor, often unnoticed plant damage. The insects that eat native



plants are the very ones that best support our wildlife. Without these insects, song birds would have nothing to feed their young and frogs and lizards would starve. Without pollinators our tables would lack many fruits and vegetables and even farm animals would have less to eat.

For the occasional genuinely troublesome garden pest, use integrated pest management techniques found at www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/ .

FACT: Native plants are a critical link to restoring the environment and keeping our wildlife alive. If we integrate a few natives into our yards each year, together our gardens can become ecosystems of refuge for irreplaceable birds, pollinators, and innumerable other creatures.

For ideas and help with growing natives, visit www.cnps.org/cnps/grownative/. To better understand why natives are essential to our wellbeing, read “Bringing Nature Home: How Native Plants Sustain Wildlife in Our Gardens” by Douglas Tallamy. For native gardening pointers, try “California Native Gardening: A Month-By-Month Guide” by Helen Popper. Both books can be found at the Tuolumne County Public Library.

Vera Strader finds that bees and hummingbirds are especially attracted to the native plants in her yard.