

Low- and No-Water Wonders for Difficult Places

By Rachel Oppedahl

The view from my kitchen window is a steep, rocky, weedy incline that rises to meet a largely empty five-acre parcel where a neighbor's horses wander. The sight of horses out my kitchen window is a gift. The weedy incline that belongs to me is not. And so, I've been on a mission lately to research plants that will not only crowd out the foxtails on that sunbaked hillside, but also, require next to nothing from me after an initial year or two of summer watering. Oh, and they need to be pretty.



Before getting into the plants I have researched and intend to buy, I need to sing the praises of rosemary. The only thing growing on that incline besides foxtails are three small mounds of that wonderful Mediterranean herb. They're volunteers, and I have no idea how they got there. But I'm grateful because they're evergreen, have lovely little bluish-lavender flowers, the bees love them, I've never once watered them, and it's always nice to have free herbs outside your kitchen door. So, if you're looking for a low-water plant for a sunny, difficult site, I highly recommend rosemary. That said, my rosemary is going to need some fast-growing company if I want that hillside covered in my lifetime. It's a v-e-r-y slow grower.

Several California natives that thrive in blast-furnace sun, rocky soil and no summer water after the first year or two top my list for that scruffy incline: Matilijia Poppy, Silver Lupine and California Lilac.

The Matilijia Poppy (*Romneya coulteri*) is a stunning bush that is topped with giant, white, crepe paper-like flowers with golden centers from late spring through late summer. There's a stand of them in front of a house on Phoenix Lake Road in Sonora that takes my breath away every time I drive by. The literature says they grow to seven feet tall by 15 feet wide, but this stand has stayed about five feet tall by six feet wide for years. The blossoms attract bees and butterflies. The leaves are a soft, grey-green and slightly scalloped. It prefers full sun, good drainage, and once established, no water unless you want to extend bloom time. I have high hopes for this bush because it's supposed to be a fast, aggressive grower, spreading by underground runners. (It's probably not a great choice if your yard is small or you're worried about it competing with other plants.)

Silver Lupine (*Lupinus albifrons*) is a small shrub with feathery silver leaves and showy blue to violet flower stocks in spring and summer. It's a fast grower that prefers sun and sandy or rocky soil. I think I'll toss some California Poppy seeds among them and hope for that happy orange and purple show in spring.

There are many species of California Lilac (*Ceanothus*), from ground covers to bushes and trees. They are evergreen, have small, round, heavily veined leaves, and are covered with gorgeous, small blue flowers in spring. The plant is a bee magnet and also a food source for larvae of some butterfly and moth species, and other beneficial insects. The growth rate is moderate. There are some *Ceanothus* species that prefer cool, moist coastal climates, though, so look for those that prefer foothill conditions.

A fellow Master Gardener wondered why I don't just leave the foxtails. After all, they are an attractive grass native to California and it's true, I don't have to water them. Here was my answer: "Can you spell v-e-t b-i-l-l?"

The list of attractive California natives that grow in "difficult" sites and don't grow stickers that get caught in your dog's ear or nose is long, so check out the plant finder at the Sierra Foothills Chapter of the California Native Plant Society's website: <http://www.sierrafoothillscnps.org/>.

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