

The Press Democrat
May 9, 2026

GARDENING ADVICE

Remove weeds to plant keystone native plants

BY SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS
FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT



New manzanita growth sprouts in Santa Rosa. Christopher Chung – The Press Democrat, 2021

Question: My front yard needs help. With a family and full-time job, I only have time to mow the weeds that are growing out there. Can you recommend some low-maintenance plants that can spruce up my yard?

Answer: You don't say what kind of weeds you have, but to remove them and make room for new plants, you first need to identify the weeds. At the end of this article, you can find a link to a UC website for that purpose.

Humans have several reasons for calling a plant a weed. One reason might be that a plant is growing in the wrong location, like in sidewalk cracks or a vegetable garden. We also might pull out a plant because it's poisonous or we think it's ugly.

Invasive weeds are non-native plants that infest native habitat. Once introduced, invasive weeds spread, outcompete and eventually eliminate natives. Crabgrass, acacia trees, English ivy and Himalayan blackberry are some of the invasive plants that might be growing in our yards.

In contrast, California natives include all the plants, insects, birds, mammals and reptiles that lived here before the arrival of Europeans five hundred years ago. Those natives have evolved together over thousands of years, interacting and supporting each other, to build unique ecosystems that provide all the essential food and habitat they need to support themselves.

For example, native host plants provide shelter for butterflies and moths, where they can lay eggs and the emerging caterpillars can find food. Caterpillars, in turn, are high in protein and fat, a critical nutrient source for baby birds. The mature birds feed on insects and seeds, then re-seed the plants through their excrement.

When invasive weeds outcompete and replace the native host plants, they deprive butterflies, moths and birds of food and habitat that they've always relied on, which contributes to the decline of our important native insect and animal populations.

The good news is that we can help our native wildlife by planting keystone plants. These are native plants that support the largest numbers of species within an ecosystem. If you remove the central stone — the keystone — in a Roman arch, the arch collapses. Similarly, if you remove a keystone native plant from its habitat, the habitat disappears. Remarkably, just fourteen percent of keystone plants can support ninety percent of caterpillar biomass — or the total number of caterpillars within a particular area.

Some of the keystone native shrubs and perennials you might choose to plant include:

- Manzanitas (*Arctostaphylos*): Manzanitas, recognized by their red bark, vary in size from low groundcovers to very tall shrubs. They're especially important because they're winter bloomers, providing food for hungry pollinators.
- California Lilac (*Ceanothus*): *Ceanothus* also vary in size and have beautiful spring blooms, mostly in blues.
- Coyote bush (*Baccharis*): A hardy evergreen shrub, coyote brush provides wonderful cover for birds.
- Buckwheat (*Eriogonum*): Buckwheat's blooms, which can come in creams, yellows and reds, are important for pollinators.
- California aster (*Symphotrichum chilense*): Asters provide delightful and abundant flowers in shades of blue and lavender late in the year.

- Beach strawberry (*Fragaria chiloensis*): Beach strawberry is a groundcover with flowers that pollinators love and fruit that birds and other animals savor.

Keystone native trees include:

- Oak (*Quercus*): The king of the keystone plants, oaks support hundreds of other species, providing food and shelter for birds, insects and mammals. They also help fungi, lichens and other important organisms, plus their leaf litter feeds the soil.
- Native cherry (*Prunus*): There are a number of native cherries that provide flowers before setting fruit. Choose one that works for your particular site.
- Gray pine (*Pinus sabiniana*): A drought-tolerant evergreen native to the foothills.

By planting one or more keystone plants in your yard, you support native habitat and invite more pollinators, caterpillars and birds into our environment. Another bonus is that California native plants, once established, will require less work in the garden for you!

To find more California natives that flourish in your neighborhood, go to calscape.org and enter your zip code in the search field.

For more information and useful links: Weed ID: <https://tinyurl.com/4myr8eju> Invasive horticulture plants: <https://tinyurl.com/yftv7um5> California Native Plants: <https://tinyurl.com/paauzb7p>

Contributors to this week's column were Karen Felker, Joy Lanzendorfer and Kim Nielsen-Glynn. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County sonomamg.ucanr.edu/ provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmqpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu. To receive free gardening tips and news about upcoming events, sign up for our monthly newsletter: