



I Planted California Natives: What Do I Do in September?

Water

Our plants are less prone to losing moisture with the transition to shorter days and cooler nights. On the other hand, September brings the threat of an extended heat wave and hot, gusty winds. Check your soil often by feeling 6 to 8 inches below the surface between waterings and allow it to dry out almost completely before you water again. Track the weather forecast, then water deeply and slowly during cool days ahead of a forecasted hot spell. Hand water, use a hose-end sprinkler, or run the sprinklers to apply the equivalent of 1-1.5" of rainfall. Tree of Life Nursery's [Watering Native Plants](#) describes the "Occasional Deep Soak Plus Frequent Refreshing Sprinkles" method.

If you have container plants around your home or are nurturing nursery plants for fall planting, check them often, water as needed and provide a little shade. Water seedlings, recent plantings, and riparian/wetland plants as often as needed to keep the roots cool and moist. Apply water slowly so the moisture penetrates the soil without running off.

Prune

On a cool, dry morning, prune unsightly deadwood and remove spent flower spikes and dead leaves from chaparral shrubs such as Ceanothus, Chamise, Mallows and Sages. "Limb up" trees and tall shrubs such as Elderberry, Lemonade Berry, Manzanita, and Toyon, especially those close to the house, shed, or fence. "Limbing up" means pruning the lower limbs of a shrub or tree to at least 6 feet from the ground. In addition, remove or trim shrubs, vines, and other potential "ladder" fuels surrounding trees and tall shrubs that could potentially allow a wildfire to move from the ground to the upper branches. To calculate how much vertical space you need between the top of an understory shrub and the lowest limb of the tree above, multiply the height of the shrub by three. For example, if you have a 3-foot Coffeeberry beneath a Coast Live Oak, you need 9 feet of clearance between the top of the Coffeeberry and the lowest limb of the oak. Learn more about creating defensible space around your home from CalFire's [Ready for Wildfire](#).

Deadhead perennials as needed. You may want to keep the attractive tan, rust, or brown heads of Buckwheats and St. Catherine's Lace for now. Clear faded wildflowers. Cut up, crumble, or put the trimmings through a woodchipper to use for mulch in an area that you would like wildflowers to bloom next year. Mow, shear or trim dried native grasses and sedges such as Purple Needlegrass (*Stipa pulchra*), Red Fescue (*Festuca rubra*), and Clustered Field Sedge (*Carex praegracilis*). Hold off on big pruning jobs until the shorter days of fall.

Sow and Propagate

If you're planning to sow wildflower seeds later in the fall, prepare your planting space by sprinkling water lightly every week or so this month. This will encourage any weed seeds to germinate early. Once the weeds sprout, remove them with a hoe or your favorite weeding tool. Scratching the soil surface during weeding will help get the ground ready for the seeds you want to sow before the rain begins.

You can take cuttings of evergreen shrubs such as Ceanothus, Coyote Bush, Bush Sunflower (*Encelia californica*), or Mountain Mahogany. Try starting cuttings from perennials that you have trimmed, such as California Fuchsias, Bush Monkeyflowers, Sages, or Seaside Daisy (*Erigeron glaucus*). For a step-by-step guide to starting plants from cuttings, see [Native Plant Propagation Methods: Cuttings](#) from the UC Master Gardeners of San Mateo & San Francisco Counties.



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Mulch

If you have organic mulch within 5 feet of your home's perimeter, rake it off the soil surface and move it to other garden areas that can use it. Mulch the five feet next to your home, called "Zone 0", with decomposed granite, gravel, paving stones or rock mulch to reduce potential fire fuel sources next to the building. Other types of mulch materials can be highly combustible. The UCANR Fire Network offers tips for using the right [Mulch](#) in each space to protect your home and landscape.

Clean Up

You may still find an occasional weed or invasive grass lurking underneath your shrubs or camouflaged among native grasses or sedges. Be on the lookout for Cudweed, Foxtail, Oxalis, Rabbitfoot Polypogon, or Spotted Spurge, especially in spaces that get a little extra moisture. Pull them up before they have a chance to seed or spread. If you're unsure whether a seedling is a weed or a wildflower, see if you can identify the plant using the [UC IPM Weed Photo Gallery](#), or the phone app Seek by iNaturalist.

Online Resources mentioned in this article

Watering Native Plants

<https://californianativeplants.com/blog/watering-native-plants/>

CalFire: Ready for Wildfire/Prepare for Wildfire/Defensible Space

<https://readyforwildfire.org/prepare-for-wildfire/defensible-space/>

Native Plant Propagation Methods: Cuttings

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1viH9oOMb-k14pQQ1jNaTAync0qjWl1V/view>

UC ANR Fire Network: Mulch

<https://ucanr.edu/program/uc-anr-fire-network/mulch>

UC IPM: Weed Photo Gallery

https://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/weeds_intro.html

References

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Los Olivos, CA: Cachuma Press, 2005.

O'Brien, Bart, Betsey Landis, and Ellen Mackey. Care & Maintenance of Southern California Native Plant Gardens. Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, Los Angeles California.

Claremont, CA: Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden, 2006. (out of print)

Popper, Helen. California Native Plant Gardening: A Month-by-Month Guide. Oakland, CA:

University of California Press, 2012. Available for loan from the [Ojai Library](#) (hard copy) and the [Blanchard Community Library](#), Santa Paula (hard copy and eBook).