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ADVICE TO GROW BY » MASTER GARDENERS

5 native plants that can be easy to grow, aid biodiversity and September in the Garden

QUESTION: I want to grow more native plants for a habitat garden. Can you suggest five natives that are easy to grow?

Answer: First, we applaud your interest in native plants for your home garden! Natives are lovely, sustainable and ideal for creating habitat and increase the biodiversity of your home garden. They provide food and shelter for many native California creatures, including bees, reptiles, birds, caterpillars, butterflies and dragonflies.

Here are a few things to consider when selecting native plants for a habitat garden:

- Look for plants that provide food for wildlife in the form of pollen, nectar and fruit.
- Choose a variety of bloom sizes and shapes to accommodate different feeding habits. For example, hummingbirds and butterflies both access nectar but in different ways.
- Choose multiple native plant species to provide blooms throughout the year.
- Plant two or more of the same plant close together. Mass plantings create a bigger visual impact and are also better at attracting pollinators.
- Select plants with a variety of heights, from ground covers to flowering plants, shrubs and trees.

Here we'll focus on native plants that are low in water use, require minimal care and add beauty to your landscape. Given the many microclimates in Sonoma County, from cool coastal climates to warmer inland areas, be sure to plant natives that thrive in the microclimate in which you live.

All of the following plants survive our dry summers and rainy winters, grow in full sun or part shade and thrive in a variety of soil types. These five are especially well-suited to the Santa Rosa area.

Pink flowering currant or blood currant (*Ribes sanguineum* var. *glutinosum*): The genus *Ribes* includes currants and gooseberries, with many species native to California. This fast-growing, medium-size shrub displays fragrant pink blooms from January to March and provides food for early native pollinators. Later it forms berries that ripen in late summer and fall, providing food for birds and other habitat residents. This deciduous shrub performs best if given some shade from the hot afternoon sun and may reach 8 to 10 feet tall and 6 feet wide over six growing years.

Silver bush lupine (*Lupinus albus*): This woody evergreen perennial provides nourishment for many pollinators and other insects. Showy violet-blue spires of blossoms appear in the springtime above silvery-green vegetation. Requiring little care, this native grows 3 to 4 feet tall and 2 feet wide in a few seasons and may have a long life in your garden in favorable conditions. Volunteer seedlings often pop up in later years, adding to the beautiful display.

Toyon (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*): A hardy native here in Sonoma County, this evergreen shrub produces a cluster of small white blooms in late spring and early summer, followed by bright red fruits. Mockingbirds and cedar waxwings eat this fruit during the winter months, when the berries ripen. The dense growth of two or three toyons makes a delightful hedgerow or visual screen. A single toyon shrub may grow to 8 feet tall and 6 feet wide, so plan accordingly.

Nude buckwheat (*Eriogonum nudum*): There are dozens of native California buckwheat species; most are excellent garden additions that support pollinators and butterflies. The nudum species is named for the tall, leafless, multibranched stems held high over the low-growing gray-green vegetation. In summer, white or pink-white blossoms appear then turn a russet color as summer advances. Often it produces seeds to ensure future plants. If you prefer yellow flowers, look for the varietal 'Ella Nelson's Yellow.'

California fuchsia (*Epilobium canum*): This low-growing perennial with orange-red tubular blooms makes a terrific ground cover. Many varietals are less than 18 inches tall, spread via underground rhizomes and easy to propagate. While drought-tolerant even in the driest summers, a little drip irrigation allows for more vigorous blooming and keeps the vegetation visually appealing. There may not be a better native plant choice for a hummingbird garden. This native often begins blooming in July and continues with some blooms through the early fall.

You can find these native plants and many others at nurseries that specialize in California natives.

Keep in mind that all the creatures you attract to your habitat garden need water. Providing a convenient water source, such as a birdbath with a solar-powered fountain, is an inexpensive and easy solution.

Finally, be patient! Many natives grow slowly and mature over a period of years.

More native plant information can be found at the Sonoma County Master Gardener website: bit.ly/3t8g4TL.

The California Native Plant Society also has a terrific website, where you can search native plant lists for your specific location: bit.ly/3zoh73U.

September in garden

To manage the transition from summer to fall in your garden:

- Remove summer garden veggie plants that are no longer producing. Cut plants just below the soil line, leaving the roots to decompose in place. Completely remove plants that show signs of disease and discard them in your green waste bin. Plants that show no sign of disease can be added to your home compost pile.
- Energize your garden soil for a fall and winter garden by adding 1 to 2 inches of aged, composted organic matter on top of the existing soil; you don't need to dig it in. Add an insulating layer of mulch to help retain moisture, moderate soil temperature and enhance water retention.
- Plant cool-season crops like broccoli, kale, peas, carrots, lettuce and spinach. Plant and water only what you and your family will eat. Plant California natives, generally after the rains begin. When selecting your plants, keep in mind this key principle of sustainable gardening — “right plant, right place.” Check that both the size at maturity and the plant's sun exposure needs will be met in that location. There are thousands of native California plants species, but you may want to review our list of native plants recommended for Sonoma County at bit.ly/2WwQRWt.

Bulbs are now available in most nurseries and garden centers. It is generally best to wait until after the first rains to plant them, but you can buy them now while there is a good selection. Store them in a cool, dry place until you're ready to plant.

Clean your gutters and all areas where leaves, needles and debris accumulate, especially the 5-foot perimeter around your house. We are still in fire season.

Contributors to this week's column were Bill Klausing, Pat Decker, Laura Eakin and Debbie Westrick. Send your gardening questions to scmqpd@gmail.com. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County (sonomamg.ucanr.edu) provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. The Master Gardeners will answer in the newspaper only questions selected for this column. Other questions may be directed to their Information Desk: 707-565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.