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Native bulbs to purchase now and plant in the fall

By SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS

FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT



Native Americans crushed the bulbs of what we now call soap plant, here just before blooming in Cloverdale, to create lather for cleaning clothing and baskets.

Photo by John Burgess/The Press Democrat

Question: I've always grown tulips, freesia, and daffodils. Are there bulbs native to California I can also grow in my yard? What are some benefits and tips for growing them?

Answer: Native bulbs are a great choice for adding variety and a splash of color to your yard during spring and early summer. Additionally, because they're endemic to California, native bulbs are acclimated to local soil and weather conditions making them more resilient. They're also an important food and nectar source for local birds and wildlife. Successful cultivation is aided by knowledge of a bulb's native habitat, including the type of soil and sun or shade exposure required.

The perennials known as "garden bulbs" belong to three different groups: Those with true bulbs, those from corms and those from reproductive rhizomes. California is

home to more than 200 species of native bulbs, corms and rhizomatous perennials. Many can be found growing in coastal areas and in mountains and foothills. Even the deserts are home to a few species.

Indigenous Americans used native bulbs for food, medicine and tools. They crushed soap plant (*Chlorogalum pomeridianum*) bulbs to create a lather for cleaning clothing and baskets. Common camas (*Camassia quamash*) bulbs were cooked for two days in earthen pit ovens. The fructose in the cooked camas was used as a sweetener. Camas cakes, made from baked camas left to dry, were stored over winter or used for trade with other groups.

The best time of year to purchase native bulbs for fall planting is summer when availability is typically more plentiful. Resources for native bulbs include local nurseries that carry native plants, bulb catalogs and online nurseries that specialize in native plants and bulbs. Some California native bulbs to consider growing include:

California brodiaea (*Brodiaea californica*): The largest species in the genus *Brodiaea*, *Brodiaea californica* has an upright growth habit and reaches up to 24 inches in height. The dainty flowers vary in color from white to lavender and occasionally pink.

California fawn lily (*Erythronium californicum*): Grows in clumps up to 8-12 inches tall. In spring, cream flowers emerge. Features grassy texture and grows well with mostly shade and does well in rich, well-drained soil.

One-leaf onion (*Allium unifolium*): Delicate flower clusters range from pink to near-white. Grows 12-24 inches high and naturalizes easily and slowly spreads forming lovely colonies.

For photos of California native bulbs in bloom and pointers for their care, check out the UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County video “California Native Bulbs”:
<https://bit.ly/3WudID6>

Do's and don'ts for native bulb success

Do:

- Follow the planting instructions for planting depth and spacing, timing, sunlight and water requirements.
- Plant in late fall after the first rain.
- Plant bulbs in informal groups for a more visual impact and a natural look.
- Cut back the flower stalks after they die back and have become brown.

Don't:

- Amend the soil when planting
- Water bulbs during summer and fall. Bulbs are prone to rotting if watered when they're dormant.

- Fertilize bulbs planted in the ground. Supplemental nutrients are unnecessary.
- Tie back or braid the leaf stalks when they become brown. They need sunlight to produce food to replenish the bulb.

For more information, go to <https://bit.ly/3WEgwe>

Contributors to this week's column were Lisa Howard and Robert Williams. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. Reach the desk at 707-565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.