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Start planning fall, winter changes to your garden now
Look to California natives, but don't plant when garden soil is overly wet because that can cause roots to rot

By SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS
FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT



Ceanothus offers vibrant color in spring and requires little care.
Photo by MG William Klausing

Question: I'm considering replacing some of my ornamental garden plants at the end of summer. I see some local nursery plants are labeled California natives. What's the benefit of planting these? Do you have a few suggestions?

Answer: There are many good reasons to choose California natives for your garden. Including California native plant species in your home garden will help support wildlife, increase biodiversity in local ecosystems and decrease the strain on limited resources.

Autumn and early winter are important seasons for planting California natives. In our Mediterranean climate, planting in the fall (October through early December), will likely yield the best results for new specimens in the home garden. And though most California native plants are drought tolerant, plan for some regular drip irrigation through at least the first summer until their roots are established.

Planting can continue into early winter, but don't plant in overly wet garden soils. Prolonged wet soil can cause young roots to rot, and walking in a wet garden can compact the soil.

Some benefits of planting in cooler weather include:

- Cooler fall temperatures reduced stress on new transplants and less water is required during planting.
- The warm soils of October and November allow for vigorous root development.
- Root systems continue to develop through fall and winter, even if the plant is nearing or entering a dormancy period. Plant high, with the root crown slightly above the soil line.
- This promotes good drainage and minimizes the risk of root diseases.

What should you plant?

Here are a few native plants to consider for your garden. Each should perform well in full sun or part shade.

Monardella villosa, commonly called coyote mint, is a modest sized native subshrub that is a pollinator's delight! The leaves have a light minty smell and deer may avoid them.

A small grouping of coyote mint adds a nice lavender-colored pop to your summer garden. Though quite tolerant of dry soil, a bit of drip irrigation during summer will add to the vigor and appearance of this species and help deter early onset dormancy. A local ecotype, 'Russian River', is available at local nurseries.

The vibrant blue of springtime is stunning when local ceanothus bloom. They range from ground covers to large shrubs that can fill almost any space in your home garden.



Monardella villosa, commonly called coyote mint is a native shrub that does well in dry soil and attracts pollinators. Photo by MG William Klausing

Once established, ceanothus require little care. Regular summer water, soil amendments, and fertilizer are not required. Early season native bees are very fond of this genus, and wildlife may eat the seed pods in summer. *Ceanothus thyrsiflorus* 'Skylark' and 'Yankee Point' are good choices.

'Skylark' at maturity is a 4-foot-tall by 5-foot-wide shrub. 'Yankee Point' spreads low to the ground, reaching 2 to 3 feet tall and 6 feet across when fully grown. Visiting deer may browse on it, but that only serves as a good natural prune, keeping it low-growing and full.

As evergreens, many varieties can also be useful as a privacy screen or hedge.

Native bunch grasses can offer habitat. First, they provide shelter for small garden creatures such as reptiles, insects and mammals. Second, their fibrous root systems can penetrate most soils, allowing winter rains to flow deeper into the soil and the water table below.

Finally, small birds eat the seeds when the plants mature. Junegrass (*Koeleria macrantha*) and California oatgrass (*Danthonia californica*) are good selections for a Sonoma County garden. Both are modest-sized perennial bunch grasses and have low water needs once established. They can also provide erosion control.

For more information on California natives, see:

Calscape.org

California Native Plants: t.ly/XR8ya

Contributors to this week's column were William Klausling, Lisa Howard and Robert Williams. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County <https://sonomamg.ucanr.edu/> 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 either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.