



CALIFORNIA NATIVE SHRUBS FOR FALL PLANTING

Peggy Just Peterson, UC Master Gardener of Placer County

From *The Curious Gardener*, Fall 2013

The days are shorter, the evenings are chilly, and there's that fall feel in the air! Fall is my favorite time of year, because it's the best time of year to plant trees and shrubs, especially California natives. The warm days, cool nights and increasing rains ease the transition of the plants' roots into the native soil of the garden, establishing a good start before real cold sets in. And when it starts to warm up in spring, those roots will really be at home, ready to support hearty new growth well before the heat of summer arrives.

Whether planning a new flower bed or updating your landscape, it's worth thinking about using California native plants. Many native plants evolved to thrive in our foothill climate, and look beautiful and natural here. Natives can also provide a transition from landscapes full of imported plants to wilder areas of our landscapes or neighborhoods.

Other reasons to grow natives include:

- Native plants are attractive to native pollinators, which improve pollination rates for other plants in your landscape, including fruits and vegetables.
- Many natives attract birds, beneficial insects, and other wildlife, improving and diversifying the ecology of our neighborhoods.
- Because natives are adapted to our environment, they require less coddling, needing fewer pesticides and fertilizers, and less pruning than fussier imports.
- Natives also mix beautifully with many of the popular non-natives available in local nurseries or already planted in our landscapes.

Right Plant, Right Place

A common misconception is that all California native plants are drought tolerant. Many are, but if you think of the incredible diversity of ecosystems in California, you'll realize that natives can be adapted not only to our local foothill regions, but to harsh deserts; cool, moist coasts; high mountains; and every-thing in between. So, when planning to incorporate natives, we still have to be aware of choosing the right plant for the right place. This means not only paying attention to the amount of sun the plant will get, but how and how often you will provide supplemental water.

One of the most important concepts of sustainable landscaping is grouping plants together by their summer water needs—this is called *hydrozoning*. In my yard, there are separate planting areas for those that need water regularly (e.g. once a week), those that need it less often (every 10-14 days), those that need occasional water (every 3-4 weeks) and those that get no supplemental water at all. This allows me to have a variety of plants whose varying needs all get met, and it saves money on my water bill.

During drought years, you may need to consider supplemental watering during the fall, winter and spring, too. Remember that watering needs vary considerably depending on the weather; automated systems that measure the soil moisture can help remove the guesswork. And don't forget to mulch—not only will this conserve soil moisture, it will moderate soil temperature, reduce the formation of a soil crust, slow down erosion, and suppress weeds.

Regardless of the eventual water needs of your California natives, all require extra watering the first few years in the landscape. Once they are well-established, update your watering habits to meet their needs.

The following suggestions are just a few of the many wonderful California natives that do well in our foothill gardens. Check the references for more options, and plan to attend some of the fall plant sales to see what plants appeal to you, to get further information, and to buy plants for your fall planting extravaganza!

Continued on next page

Arctostaphylos (manzanita)

There are many species of this evergreen shrub suited to the foothills and valleys. *A. densiflora* 'Howard McMinn' is a favorite, growing from 5-8 feet tall and just as wide. Its urn-shaped, white flowers are followed by the tiny, apple-like fruit that give it its common name (manzanita is Spanish for "little apple"). Manzanitas require full sun to light shade, excellent drainage, and can tolerate poor or rocky soil. Once established, they need water once a month or so.

Calycanthus occidentalis (spicebush)

Spicebush is a deciduous, 5-8 foot shrub that is native along streams in our foothills. Both its springtime maroon flowers and bright green leaves are fragrant. It likes sun to partial shade, can tolerate most soils, and needs regular water.

Carpenteria californica (bush anemone)

This showy evergreen is slow-growing to 5-8 feet tall and wide, with lightly fragrant, white flowers in the spring. It tolerates ordinary garden soil, partial shade in lower, hotter elevations, with little to moderate water.

Ceanothus (wild lilac)

This is another evergreen shrub with many species to choose from. Ranging from groundcovers to small trees, they are stunning in late winter or spring, covered in blue or white flowers. Smaller-leaved varieties are less attractive to deer, and all attract a wide variety of birds and beneficial insects. They need well-drained soil, full sun and prefer **no** summer water once established. Some varieties tolerate summer water, but it may shorten their lifespan.

Cercis occidentalis (western redbud)

This beautiful, deciduous shrub (or small tree) bursts into brilliant pink bloom in early spring. It grows 10-20 feet tall and wide, and produces interesting seedpods that attract birds. It requires good drainage and little to occasional summer water.

Frangula californica (formerly *Rhamnus*) (coffeeberry)

Coffeeberry is a pretty, evergreen plant that adapts to multiple environments, making it a good choice for a site that changes from sun to shade during the day or season. It grows 4-10 feet tall and wide, and has inconspicuous flowers that attract a host of beneficial insects. Its lovely fruit changes from green to red to burgundy during the summer, and attracts birds. Site this plant carefully, as the fruit can stain patios and paths.

Fremontodendron californicum (fremontia)

These fast-growing evergreen shrubs have spectacular spring shows of yellow flowers that can obscure their leaves. While most are large, up to 20 feet tall, some hybrids are much smaller. They need good drainage, full sun and **no** summer water. They have shallow roots and may need staking in windy areas. Not as long-lived as other plants, but they bloom even when young and are truly gorgeous.

Philadelphus lewisii (western mock orange)

This deciduous, fountain-shaped shrub grows 4-10 feet tall and at least that wide. Its white, spring blossoms smell lusciously like citrus flowers. It likes sun to partial shade, good soil and drainage, and moderate water.

Rosa californica (California wild rose)

California has several species of wild rose that make perfect additions to a landscape. *R. californica* produces fragrant pink 5-petaled blossoms in spring; the stems can be quite spiny, so you may want to use it as a hedge or in an easily-weeded spot. After blooming, it produces small reddish fruit called *hips* that are attractive to birds. 3-6 feet tall and wide, it is quite easy to grow, with few of the demands of hybrid roses. It needs full sun to part shade, and very little water, although it can tolerate regular watering.

Continued on next page

Ribes sanguineum (flowering currant)

This deciduous shrub has clusters of showy pink or red blossoms in spring, followed by edible blue-black berries that birds love. It can grow 12 feet tall and needs partial shade in our climate. While it is quite drought tolerant, it looks better with occasional water.

Ribes viburnifolium (Catalina perfume)

This species of *Ribes* is evergreen and only gets about 3 feet tall. It is wonderful as a groundcover under oaks, and has the added benefit of leaves with a lovely fragrance! Its stems are a dark red, and tend to root where they touch the ground. Its pink springtime blossoms aren't particularly showy, but its leathery leaves, delicious fragrance and ease of care make up for that. It needs partial shade in really hot areas, and little to no water.

References:

Brenzel, Kathleen Norris. *The New Sunset Western Garden Book*. Time Home Entertainment Inc. 2012.

Bornstein, Carol, David Fross and Bart O'Brien. *California Native Plants for the Garden*. Cachuma Press. 2005.

California Native Plant Society, <http://www.cnps.org/>.