

Nurturing native splendor

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By Emily Green, Times Staff Writer

Southern California divides into two places: the irrigated and the dry. For those of us who inhabit the irrigated place, which is most of us, our worlds are green. Our parks, lawns, hedges and flower beds are made up almost entirely of imported plants, thirsty specimens kept lush year-round by imported water.

By contrast, the dry place is a study in silver, gray, blue, blue-green, olive, cinnamon, gold and charcoal. In the foothills and coastal bluffs, bright greens occur only fleetingly, in winter, just after the rains, then become muted with as little as the passing of a cloud.

This dry, wild palette is as varied and rich as Scotch heather, so understated it's more Ralph Lauren than Ralph himself. But for most gardeners and all but the best nurseries, working with this palette is a challenge.

The plants have largely eluded commercializing. They don't enjoy life in nursery pots. As a result, there is an upside-down quality to what we are sold. We won't see California live oaks, black walnuts, manzanitas or California lilacs sold in most home improvement stores. Rather, plants such as azaleas, suited to the damp, acid soils of the deep South, are universally stocked here.

The impulse to turn California into Connecticut west spills over into fine art. From the turn of the last century, most landscape painters shrouded their subjects in mist or moonlight, depicted irrigated gardens and even recolored scenes to fit fashionable Eastern and European ideals, says Nancy Moure, author of the 1998 book "California Art: 450 Years of Painting & Other Media."

"One painter, Franz Bischoff, a former china painter, brought china-painting colors in," she says. "If you see his paintings, it may look like the Arroyo Seco, but it's all pinks and purples."

But even for those of us who appreciate the dusky native palette, gardening with it takes more than discernment. The relative wildness of natives makes them harder, not easier, to cultivate in our irrigated inner cities. The plants seem to die in captivity. Our fretful attentions and ever-effusive sprinklers simply rot their roots.

This is not to say that we can't do it. Killing plants, alas, is part of the learning curve. Bart O'Brien, director of horticulture at Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden in Claremont, ruefully calls these failures "expensive annuals." Natives can submit to cultivation. It just takes practice. A growing band of nurseries, botanical gardens, plant societies and landscape architects is showing us how to entice some of the smoky native palette back into town.

The native gardening movement signals a coming of age. Los Angeles the boomtown was sold to the world as the place where you could grow anything. As it matures into one of the great metropolises of the Pacific, more and more gardeners are in search of an authentic plant palette, and through it, discovery of the true nature of the West.

When Upland teacher Janice Elliott decided to explore growing natives in the front yard of her suburban house, a friend recommended that she tour the grounds of Rancho Santa Ana in August. It is the largest native garden in Southern California, and its 86 acres set along the baking foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains are largely unirrigated. "If a plant looks good in August," said the friend, "buy one."

Her friend had a point. A California native that flowers in late summer is some plant. Most will be dormant — these months are not typically part of the growing season.

As O'Brien leads a tour of the grounds, one of the first lessons he gives is in California's seasons. We have all four, he says, they just don't occur at the same time as back East. For the flora that evolved here over millenniums, August is the California equivalent of January in New York. Through one hot day after the next, most native plants will either be slowed to a standstill or fast asleep as they conserve every last milliliter of water absorbed from winter rains.

Most of them are evergreen or semideciduous. Because of this, it is easy to imagine that they are suffering and need water. But only recently planted specimens should be watered (in nature, these would grab hold only in rainy season, and we can fudge that). For established natives, we should no more water them during dormancy than a New Englander should start a drip line on a barren maple tree in February.

Spring here doesn't start at Easter, he explains, but more like Thanksgiving, with the first rains. Our summer begins in the Eastern spring, when plants that flowered in June are going to seed. By July, most of the plants in the Southern California hillsides are in deep dormancy.

That said, there is still plenty of life around in late summer. As O'Brien drives one of the groundsman's trolleys along the meandering paths past manzanitas, oaks, Joshua trees and Coulter pines, lizards dart before the wheels. Beneath the intense blue-green canopies of dormant trees, desert willows dangle exquisite pink blooms. The foliage of California fuchsia, a ground cover, is a cool almost pool-liner blue-green, and its orange-pink flowers are just emerging. A flowering desert shrub with a common name like a boy's adventure book pirate, woolly blue curls, is throwing its long stalks with translucent blue flowers up to catch the sunset.

Even in the dormant months, you will find some natives flowering, explains O'Brien. It probably evolved as a reproduction strategy. "If a plant can manage it, there are some compelling reasons to flower now," he says. "There is less competition for pollinators. The seeds are dropped just before the rains."

There is so much color, only the educated eye would understand the wider dormancy. The leaves of Engelmann oaks and California live oaks may be a bit more tightly furled than when plumped out after a rain, but they are a serene blue-green. The artemisias form silver carpets. Behind the blue-green foliage of the manzanitas is bark that ranges from yellow to a deep cinnamon brown. The vivid blue flowers are gone from the ceanothus, but the tiny leaves are still intensely green, like an improved and darkened British racing green but waxy and ingeniously angled away from the afternoon sun.

This array of iridescent leaves evolved for entirely practical reasons, says O'Brien. In plants, form always follows function. The bluish insulation on oak leaves, the iridescence of sage, the olives of coyote bush, the waxy coating on ceanothus leaves all cool the leaves, equipping plants to thrive in high heat with nothing but winter rain. The wax prevents water evaporation through the leaves, the silver coloration reflects sun, the tiny hairs insulate the plant and in coastal situations trap even a trace of fog that settles on the leaf.

There is a valuable lesson here even for those of us who don't want to plant natives. Learn how to read foliage and, when next visiting a commercial nursery, it'll be easy to deduce how hardy a plant is just by looking at it. A broad, porous, bright-green leaf will lose moisture quickly and wilt in an afternoon. Plants in the blue-green California palette, especially ones with fuzzy or waxy leaves, suggest not only drought tolerance, but also that over-watering during dormancy will bring rot rather than relief.

The aromatics rising from the grounds are intoxicating, not so much sweet as spicy, like after-shave should be. It emerges that these dusky natives are also often resinous. The same volatile oils that produce the scent of chaparral are often nature's answer to engine coolant.

Once we begin to appreciate the ecology behind the colors and bewitching aromatics, our green-green lawns can suddenly look as wrong as Conan O'Brien on a Malibu lifeguard stand. Garden designer

Nancy Goslee Power, the woman behind the gardens at the Norton Simon Museum of Art in Pasadena, started using natives precisely because of the colors. "There's nothing more lovely than gray foliage that's backlit at the end of a day or that you can see in the moonlight," she says. "Grays in the garden become moon plants."

For others, a switch from a bright to a muted native palette is a way to support wildlife and cut down on water and lawn maintenance in the front yard, while continuing with the old green, irrigated regime in the back. Janice Elliott started tentatively, by digging out a small spot by her driveway and planting it with natives when her husband, Brian, was out of town. They liked it so well, they ripped up the rest of the lawn to create a small mock arroyo planted with salvias, artemisias and cactuses bedded in gravel and river rock.

So many birds, butterflies and hummingbirds moved in, the Elliotts now have to steel themselves to deadhead. There is even a plaque on their garage door declaring their home a wildlife refuge.

Steve Hartman has done much the same with his Spanish-style Sherman Oaks home. In the rear, in the shadow of two massive deodar cedars, there is a wetland garden — not all native, but a cool retreat in Valley heat. But in front, it is dry and strictly native. White, black and Cleveland sages greet passersby with their architectural flowering spires and intense perfume. A tall, vibrant yellow goldenbush is in full blossom, as are the fairy dusters and desert willows. Goldfinches sweep overhead, scolding from their airspace.

It is magical, but it is not the work of a beginner. Hartman is secretary of the California Native Plant Society, an organization that has gone from a bunch of Berkeley idealists in 1965 to 32 chapters and 10,000 members.

Getting gardeners to convert can be tough, not necessarily due to lack of interest, but because of difficulty finding the plants then knowing what to do with them. The society, along with botanical gardens such as Rancho Santa Ana and Descanso Gardens in La Cañada, can help, starting with its Web site.

Traditionally, finding the plants has required contacting specialty nurseries. But Dave Fross, founder of Native Sons wholesale nursery in Santa Barbara, is now supplying chains such as Armstrong Garden Centers and Marina del Rey Nursery. Recently he put a native section in Roger's Gardens in Corona del Mar. The blow came when he watched the public's response. "Most people walked straight by," he says. The problem was that many of the natives were dormant. He's now investigating how to improve plant tags. "To get this to work, it will require some labeling, some pictures," he says.

The most difficult step, however, may be retuning our notions of beauty. Kevin O'Connell, head of the native plant section at Descanso Gardens, says that his challenge is competing with showy displays of tulips and the like at the entrance. By the time visitors get to the native section, they are blind to its subdued grandeur.

In many ways, with most of our eyes trained on irrigated plants, we've all had this sort of false start. It's the botanical equivalent of beginning a meal with ice cream. Learning to appreciate the native palette is much like progressing from sweet foods to savory ones. O'Brien, O'Connell, Fross and Power all use the same word to describe the California spectrum: "subtle."

But the rewards are thrilling. The dry-scape reveals the colors of stoicism. Catch sight of a Joshua tree backlit at sunset at Rancho Santa Ana and, suddenly, there it is, so majestic, California as nature intended it: a blue-green beauty, implacable even in an inferno.

The secret -- and colorful -- growing cycles of ordinary natives

The problem with buying native plants is that there is no guarantee the plant will be doing its thing at the time of sale. A Western redbud that looks like a leafless twig in November can be aflame with pink blossoms in the spring. As a guide for shopping for natives, here are some tips from Kevin O'Connell of Descanso Gardens on the blooming cycles of natives sold in Southern California specialist nurseries.

SEPTEMBER

Trichostema lanatum (mountain woolly blue curls): Silvery low to medium shrub with arresting chaparral perfume and year-round bright blue flowers.

Eriogonum cinereum (buckwheat): Silver chaparral plant with white flowers that turn saffron, then burnt red in fall.

Artemesia tridentata (Great Basin sagebrush): Slow-growing silver aromatic shrub with long yellow flowers in fall.

OCTOBER

Berberis aquifolium (Oregon holly grape): Autumn beauty: blue berries ripening, leaves turning gold.

Sambucas mexicana (blue elderberries): A silver-leafed tree with blue berries that are good for pies. Best in large spaces and very successful with California walnut and coastal live oak trees. Important habitat and food source for birds.

Arctostaphylos refugioensis (manzanita): One of the earlier bloomers of hundreds of types of manzanitas that come into bloom throughout fall and winter. Fragrant pink blossoms. When buying manzanita from more than 200 cultivars, keep in mind that some can become small trees, while others are almost ground cover.

NOVEMBER

Ribes sanguineum var. *glutinosum* (pink flowering currant or winter currant): A blithely classy bramble with delicate pink blossoms that emerge just as the plant begins to leaf out in early winter. Berries follow shortly.

DECEMBER

Heteromeles arbutifolia (toyon, Christmas berry or holly): The plant that gave Hollywood its name. Can be trained as a small tree or shrub, glossy leaves and bright red berries. Flowers in spring.

Symphoricarpos microphyllus (creeping snowberry): Deciduous shrub that can form a thicket for a bird habitat.

Ribes malvaceum (chaparral currant): A late-autumn, early-winter blooming currant dangling white pink flowers. Produces berries in spring, then it loses its leaves in summer.

JANUARY

Iris douglasiana: Typically, gardeners will be putting bulbs in during autumn and winter, but the earliest native irises can appear in November.

Ribes speciosum (fuchsia flowered gooseberry): Another bramble, this one thorny, with gray-green leaves, gorgeous red flowers and spring berries.

Ceanothus 'Gentian Plume' (California lilac): One of the earliest of the hundreds of these glorious natives, with thick mats of glossy, dark-green leaves. Flowers run from white through every shade of blue to indigo. Gentian Plume produces bright-blue flowers. May bloom twice, in sync with roses.

FEBRUARY

Ceanothus cyaneus (Sierra blue ceanothus or San Diego mountain lilac): Spectacular, tolerant shrub grows to about 15 feet, with enormous bright-blue flowers.

Salvia spathacea (pitcher sage, hummingbird sage): A foothill native, clumping, low perennial with the palette of a beet, dark-green leaves and spiking dark-red flowers in early winter. Good for under California live oaks. Claret-colored calyces are a handsome feature after the petals drop.

Salvia brandegei (coastal sage scrub): Long, thin, dark-green leaves and pale lavender flowers. Can reach 4 to 5 feet tall.

Cercis occidentalis (Western redbud): Small tree with graceful limbs that produce cherry-ink blossoms in late winter, followed by bright-green heart-shaped leaves that become darker as summer progresses, before turning red and gold in August. Leaves drop in fall.

MARCH

Ceanothus 'Concha' (indigo blue): More ceanothus, this time with the deepest of the wide range of blues.

Salvia leucophylla (purple sage): Slender silver-green leaves with abundant rose-pink flowers from dramatic whorls.

APRIL

Eschscholzia californica (California poppy): The month for all wildflowers, including poppies, lupines, baby-blue eyes, lilies and irises.

Lavatera assurgentiflora (California tree mallow): Large, flowering shrub, native answer to the more common French *Lavatera bicolor*. Handsome leaves vaguely shaped like a maple leaf. Flowers year-round, heaviest in spring. Tolerates some water.

Elymus condensatus 'Canyon Prince' (giant wild rye): A blue-green landscaping grass that tufts to about 3 feet and whose colors keep saturating after every rain, then brown out with drought.

Encelia californica: Sunny, mounding shrub produces a bright spray of yellow blooms like a sunflower. Good for erosion control.

Achillea millefolium (yarrow): Lacy-leafed, gray-green flowering ground cover with red, pink and white flowers from spring to September. Flowers make good landing pads for butterflies.

MAY

Romneya coulteri (Matilija poppy): Spectacular silver-leafed mounding shrub with exquisite crepe-like white flowers the size of saucers, with bright-yellow stamens. The tram driver at Descanso Gardens calls it "the fried-egg plant."

Salvia clevelandii (Cleveland sage): Possibly the most bewitchingly aromatic plant of the California garden. Silvery gray foliage on striking brown stems gives way to spring and summer purple-blue flowers. Excellent for hummingbirds.

Salvia apiana (white sage): The name refers to its power as a bee magnet. Foliage is a light gray-green.

Salvia sonomensis (Sonoma sage, creeping sage): Low-growing with lavender flowers, excellent ground cover.

JUNE

Eriogonum giganteum (buckwheat; St. Catherine's lace): A spreading shrub, to perhaps 5 feet, with silvery foliage and white spring flowers. As summer progresses, the blooms slowly turn gold.

Justica californica (chuparosa, California beloperone): Low shrub with spectacular orange-red tubular flowers in April, May and June. Excellent nectar plant for hummingbirds.

Penstemon heterophyllus (foothill penstemon): Low perennial with elegant, deep-green narrow leaves and deep purple tubular flowers.

Lessingia filaginifolia 'Silver Carpet' (California aster): Iridescent foliage with small, daisy-like lavender and yellow flowers in summer.

AUGUST

Epilobium (formerly *Zauschneria* or California fuchsia): Comes into bloom with bright orange flowers in the most unforgiving months of summer heat.

Isocoma menziesii (goldenbush or bladderpod): Coastal scrub plant in sunflower family, becomes good-sized shrub, from 3 to 5 feet tall. Tolerates clay. Covered in vivid yellow flowers April to December.

Chilopsis linearis (desert willow): A small tree or large shrub. Either way, a stunner. Long, narrow oleander-like leaves produce fragrant tubular flowers in pink and purple. Such good sources of nectar that they are used by beekeepers to revive Central Valley pollinators.

Oenothera (evening primrose): Small, pink night-blooming flowers and nectar source for the magical twilight feeders, hummingbird moths.

Recommended reading

"Landscape Plants for Western Regions: An Illustrated Guide to Plants for Water Conservation" (Land Design Publishing, 1992) — available in libraries.

"Selected Plants for Southern California Gardens," Joan Citron, editor, Southern California Horticultural Society.

Organizations

California Native Plant Society, Sacramento; (916) 447-2677; <http://www.cnps.org> .

Native gardens

Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden, 1500 N. College Ave., Claremont; (909) 625-8767.

Descanso Gardens, 1418 Descanso Drive, La Cañada Flintridge; (818) 949-4200;
<http://www.descanso.com> .

Santa Barbara Botanic Garden, 1212 Mission Canyon Road; (805) 682-4726; <http://www.sbbg.org> .

Native plant nurseries

Matilija Nursery, 8225 Waters Road, Moorpark; (805) 523-8604;
http://www.matilija_nursery.com.

Theodore Payne Foundation: 10459 Tuxford St., Sun Valley; (818) 768-1802;
<http://www.theodorepayne.org> .

Roger's Gardens native plant section, 2301 San Joaquin Hills Road, Corona del Mar; (949) 640-5800;
<http://www.rogersgardens.com> .

Las Pilitas Nursery, 8331 Nelson Way, Escondido; (760) 749-5930; <http://www.laspilitas.com/nurseries/escondido.htm>.