

Winter? To natives, it's spring

This time of year is ideal for growing plants that evolved in the Southland. Hunt down an enticing lilac or manzanita, plop it in the ground, then settle in and listen for the hummingbirds.

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The standing joke about Southern California is that it has no seasons. Gardeners know better. We have seasons, just not in the same order as the rest of the country.

Here, winter is the sweetest season. Take last Sunday. The skyline was wind-swept, air rain-washed, the night chilly, day balmy. For the next three months, the California climate is not just the kindest to us, but also to the plants that evolved here. So, if you've been flirting with the idea of putting in a Western redbud, or California fuchsia, now is the time to do it.

If you're not, hopefully some eco-sold hasn't put you off the idea. Gardeners turn to natives for any number of reasons: yes, on occasion to feel damnably smug, but also to avoid laying in sprinklers, or to rip the rickety expensive things out. Others want to entice butterflies and birds. Nothing lures swallowtails and hummingbirds like California lilac or manzanita. For yet others, it is the romance of the chaparral, the scents of sage and artemisia.

My own vice is music. Imported plants are no good to tree crickets, which is why night-song so often vanishes in the path of suburbs.

My father loved their twilight chorusing and would sit listening to it for hours on end. It took some doing to track down a cricket-ologist in Palo Alto to explain that our local crickets like to live in oaks. After my father died last year, there was no question what would be planted in his name. Last weekend, I was the one in line at the Theodore Payne Foundation with an Engelmann oak sapling in my wagon.

Whatever sets a gardener on the path to using natives, once you get started, these plants take almost no care. They strip the work out of gardening. The hardest part is getting started. Finding the plants in their home state may be the most difficult. Though there are a couple of honorable exceptions, such as Roger's Gardens in Orange County and the Marina del Rey Garden Center, few mainstream outlets stock natives. Rather, they are geared to the usual lawn, hedge, flowering tree combos sold in much the same formation from Florida to Alaska.

So the native gardener must improvise. Window-shopping is best done hill-walking. That's my kind of mall. For more concentrated collections replete with plant tags, grab a pen, notebook and head for Descanso Gardens, Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden or Santa Barbara Botanic Garden.

On my first trip to Descanso, I came away taken by the cinnamon-colored bark and graceful turns of manzanita boughs. I had to have one even before my eye reached the subtle grey-green foliage and thick sprays of tiny, bell-shaped pink flowers. But all I knew was that I wanted "a manzanita."

The choice was far from made. It emerged that there were more species and cultivars of manzanitas than flavors of Baskin-Robbins ice creams. At the Theodore Payne Foundation, the variety 'John Dourley' looked perfect for a low hedge. But the cultivar 'Howard McMinn' at Rancho Santa Ana was an aspiring tree. I needed a book. So, I've since learned, does every serious gardener in Los Angeles.

Next year, a long-awaited volume by the horticulture directors of Rancho Santa Ana and Santa Barbara botanic gardens and the founder of Native Sons nursery will finally be published. In the meantime, the best resources are the websites of the three leading native plant nurseries: Theodore Payne Foundation in Sun Valley, Matilija Nursery in Moorpark and Las Pilitas in Escondido. All are good. The one put together by the two scientists who founded Las Pilitas is so good, it gets more than a million and half hits every year.

"People choose plants on our website and buy elsewhere," says author and nursery owner Burt Wilson. "We don't mind."

Once you get an idea of what plants you want, decide where you want to put them, and prepare the bed. Buying a plant first then daring yourself to dig a bed is like buying a dress convinced you'll diet your way into it. Early rain this year means the soil is already damp and pliable. My own tool of choice in removing lawn or conditioning soil where concrete has been removed is a pick. Use the sharp nose to trace the line border, the blunt end to break up the sod. Then a slender-nosed "lady shovel" is the best choice to loosen compacted soil beneath and pick out roots and rubble.

Keep in mind that what you uncover will not be native conditions but building-site hardpan. Builders will have stripped the top soil then steam-rolled what remained to level the lot. The soil should probably be amended.

Alternating with pick and shovel, break up the ground to a foot's depth. Spade in mulch as much as 30% to 50%, mixing it. Oak leaf mold is perfect. Spread about a half inch of chicken manure over the top, then spade it in. The worms will thank you. If the soil is heavy clay and your heart is set on chaparral or hillside plants that need fast draining conditions, then amend around the plant to a foot deep and foot in every direction from the root-ball with a 50-50 mix of pumice. This will keep water from rotting the roots.

Now go to the nursery. Native plants are not cheap: from \$4 to \$7 for one-gallon specimens. So vow not to overplant. Planted before winter rains and mulched to conserve water, most natives grow quickly.

At specialist nurseries, the high prices pay for knowledgeable staff. Check with nursery workers to see that the companion planting you envision is appropriate: oaks with coral bells, artemisia with salvia and so on.

To the make or break subject: water. When planting natives, the single most important thing to do is keep them out of the reach of sprinklers. After planting, if the rain is unreliable, water them deeply and slowly and at a trickle once a month until the spring. Then, throughout the summer, simply hose the plants off when they are gritty, or if they are some of the more water-loving of the natives, group them, then irrigate them appropriately. This will vary between sparingly and never.

Always check a plant's background. "Riparian" natives, such as western red buds, evolved along river beds and need more water and less sun. For chaparral plants and many inland oaks, if rain is scarce for the rest of planting season, water them every one to two months with slow, steady drips but dry them out in the summer. They will be dormant.

The defining quirk of California climate isn't simply our winter planting season, but summer dormancy. In much the same way that eastern natives adapted to freezing conditions by slumbering through winter, California natives cope with summer heat by shutting down for a long summer's sleep. Watering dormant natives can kill them. They can't process the water. They will seem to wilt, but it won't be dryness. Their roots will have rotted.

Sometimes, as with many of the sages, it's not clear whether a plant has shut down. They simply stop growing. Other times it's more dramatic. The ivory-flowered buckeyes, so flamboyant in the spring, lose their leaves in August. They're fine. They do it because California has such distinct seasons.

Where to start and what to try

Native doesn't mean indestructible. Here is a list of tried and true "garden tolerant" natives, or, more simply, suggestions for a few good plants.

Artemisia (*Artemisia californica* 'Canyon Gray'): Good fuzzy gray-green fill. Drought tolerant. Intensely aromatic when crushed.

California fuchsia (*Zauscheneria*, formerly *Epilobium*): Fuzzy, gray-green foliage, vivid hot red tubular flowers. Manna for hummingbirds, and a long, resilient flowering season. Low-growing, so not for a cat garden.

California lilac (*Ceanothus*): Glossy foliage is darker, truer than British racing green. Flowers come in shades including white and deep blue. Wonderful butterfly plant. Can survive water to the degree that it's one of the most popular shrubs in New Zealand.

California rose (*Rosa californica*): Brambly little bush with lots of deer-proofing by way of thorns. In autumn, they produce the radiant orange bouquets of hips. Good for mixed beds.

Coast mallow (*Lavatera assurgentiflora*): Stunning evergreen plant with white tinted, deep red flowers. Flowers are intoxicating to butterflies. Leaves attract a sucking insect that brings swarms of chattering tits every spring.

Coyote bush: Good mix in a lavender garden; can grow into a handsome midsize shrub with small, almost olive-green leaves and late autumn early winter bloom of small white flowers with a musky, downright frank scent as potent as jasmine or citrus. Can take clay, take or leave water.

Desert willow (*Chilopsis linearis*): Large shrub with narrow leaves and pink tubular flowers. Hummingbirds nest in it, praying mantises cling to the limbs, sure they're invisible. Still in bloom in September. Likes moderate water.

Indian mallow (*Abutilon palmeri*): Stunning plant with poppy-orange flowers and fuzzy, gray-green foliage. Blooms almost year-round. Won't say no to an occasional summer shower.

Manzanita (*Arctostaphylos*): Burt Wilson of Las Pilitas Nursery reckons that if home gardeners only put in a mix of manzanitas and California lilacs, they could do a national park's worth of good for California butterflies and birds. A species of more than 40 varieties and cultivars, from ground cover to trees. Has cinnamon bark, gray-green leaves, nectar-rich flowers.

San Diego sage (*Salvia Munzii*): Spindly plant with bright blue flowers. Blooms spring through summer, but started early this year with autumn rain. Forgives clay, pops back from watering, can lose all leaves in extreme summer heat.

Matilija poppy (*Romneya coulteri*): Enormous flowering shrub with big gray-green leaves and huge white and yellow flowers that gave it the name "the fried-egg plant." Spreads by roots, grows to a large clump as high as 6 feet, to easily 8 feet across. Use only in a spot with lots of space to cover.

Recommended native plant nurseries:

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

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

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

Tree of Life Nursery, 33201 Ortega Highway, San Juan Capistrano; (949) 728-0685;
<http://www.treeoflifenuresery.com>.