

Using California Native Plants to Adapt to the Drought

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Are you having to let your lawn go brown and let your landscape plants suffer or die because of the water cutbacks encouraged or required of all of us? One strategy for using less water and maintaining some beauty in your landscape is to use more California native plants, especially those plants that are adapted to this region of dry summers.

Over the years home landscapers have often relied on non-native species for their plant selections. Most California gardeners seem to have accepted the long and hallowed tradition of importing plants from Europe, Asia and other far-away places, often having tropical or rainy summer areas, when designing their home landscapes. That tradition is changing rapidly as more and more gardeners awaken to the ecological, aesthetic, and functional reasons for choosing natives.

California has a huge diversity of habitats that are home to thousands of different plants. Those plants that have evolved here are best adapted to our climate and environment. Our native wildlife has evolved with these plants and thrive best when large numbers of natives are in the landscape. Our regional natives are adapted to summer-dry conditions, and many can get by on little or no summer irrigation

water. Using natives can evoke a sense of place and of the wild habitats that so many of us cherish. The smell of a native sage, the spring color of native wildflowers, the attractiveness of native flowering plants to bees and butterflies and birds--all can remind us of that favorite trail, camping spot or scenic viewpoint that means so much to us. And many of these plants are just plain interesting and beautiful.

Finding native plants to put in your landscape has gotten easier and easier in recent years. There are many nurseries around the area and the state that specialize in them, and conventional nurseries are stocking more and more. While the selection available to home gardeners is still but a fraction of what grows in the wild, researchers and growers are rapidly learning what works and what doesn't and are making more species readily available all the time. There are a number of books and websites with recommendations for good plants. The Master Gardeners have two free brochures, "Outstanding Plants for Alameda County" and "More Outstanding Plants for Alameda County," that recommend useful and attractive landscape plants, many of which are natives. You can download a PDF of each brochure and see photos of the plants at the Alameda County Master Gardener website:

<http://acmq.ucanr.edu/>

If you want to see the plants growing before making your decisions, there are several very good options. Alameda County Master Gardeners tend three demonstration gardens displaying native and other water-conserving plants: the Lake Merritt Trials Garden within the Lake Merritt Community Gardens in Oakland; the Livermore Demonstration Garden at the Martinelli Center



Mimulus auranticus, Sticky or Shrubby Monkey Flower blooms over a long spring and summer season. Shown here at the Lake Merritt Trials Garden.

in the Livermore Valley; and a demonstration garden within Quarry Lakes Regional Park in Fremont. These gardens grow in three of the microclimates in our region, so visit the one closest to you when looking for plants that will do well in your garden. Information and photographs are available on the ACMG website shown above.

To see the array of native plants in naturalistic surroundings, visit the East Bay Regional Park Botanic Garden in Tilden Park in Berkeley. It is an all-native garden with varied habitats that showcase the tremendous diversity of natives. Admission to the garden is free. Find information at <http://www.ebparks.org/page156.aspx>.

To see natives growing in home gardens, check out the upcoming free garden tour called "Bringing Back the Natives" on Sunday, May 4, 2014. To register, go to www.bringingbackthenatives.net.

Here's wishing you the best in exploring the world of California native plants. If you have questions or need help with native plants or any other garden issue, you can call the Alameda County Master Gardeners' Help Desk at 510-639-1371 or email us at mgalameda@ucdavis.edu.