

Create a Native Plant Garden Your Neighbors Will Love

By Ellen Zagory

As a believer in gardening with California native plants I am sometimes affronted by the comments of non-believers about our native plantings. Comments I have heard include “why didn’t you get rid of those plants when they died?” and “when are you going to mow that messy area?”. Although I appreciate the golden grasses and seed heads left for birds, others sometimes see what simply looks to them like an untidy planting.



Tidiness has never been high on my list of priorities but perhaps we need to consider it if we want others to accept native plantings. Highly visible front plantings, especially, can benefit from thoughtful plant selection and timely maintenance. Use of evergreen shrubs for backbone and structure is a good first step. Toyon, coffeeberry, California lilac, dwarf coyotebrush (male clones won’t seed) and Oregon grape are easy as an evergreen backdrop that provides flower and color in season. Placed correctly to accommodate their ultimate size, they

should need pruning only to train for structure or remove an occasional broken or wayward stem.

Smaller in size are the sages that produce attractive whorls of nectar-rich flowers and fragrant foliage. These plants need a once or twice-a-year pruning to keep them dense. Selected forms of Cleveland sage (*Salvia clevelandii*) and the white-leaved *Salvia apiana* are my two favorites, although they can build up brittle wood at the base and need periodic replacement. Hummingbird sage (*Salvia spathacea*) with whorls of red flowers, is also easy to use as ground cover, although it is more of a clumper than a solid mat.

These well-behaved plants provide a great compliment for tough and dependable deer grass (*Muhlenbergia rigens*). I love the “Fourth of July” fireworks shapes of single deer grass plants placed among green-leaved shrubs. This seemingly indestructible grass produces seedlings only occasionally and withstands a variety of conditions: sun, part shade, summer drought or irrigation. If a plant starts to look a little brown we pull out our power hedge trimmers and cut it off as close to the ground as possible. Followed by irrigation, it rapidly produces a new, attractive, green puff of foliage.

Annual flowers left to seed require quick mowing after seed drop to keep a native planting neat. California poppies should be mowed to an inch or two high when the spring flowers wane. Given a dose of water they will re-bloom in summer. Mow again in winter or when they become unsightly. California fuchsia (*Epilobium canum*) also should be promptly cut to the ground after bloom in fall to avoid a “dead-looking” planting. Look for non-aggressive forms like ‘Everett’s Choice’ (only 6-8” tall but fully winter deciduous) and ‘Bowman’s #1’ (to 18” and more evergreen).

Gardening with California natives makes the garden better habitat for native creatures and contributes to landscape sustainability. If we want more people to follow our example, and plant more natives, perhaps making plantings more acceptable, by being “tidy”, is a place to start.

An example of a “tidy” California native planting plan using some of these plants is available on the UC Davis Arboretum website at http://arboretum.ucdavis.edu/plan_california.aspx.

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