

CALIFORNIA NATIVE PLANTS IN THE ORNAMENTAL LANDSCAPE:
AN OPPORTUNITY TO REINHABIT OUR LOCAL ECOSYSTEMS

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Landscaping with California native plants has a long history. The earliest European explorers of the California coast collected plants to bring back to their home countries. Indeed, to this day many species of California wildflowers are cherished beauties in European gardens. Yet, we do not have to travel to Europe to enjoy California native plants! Here along the coast of the Monterey Bay we are blessed to have a large variety of landscape plants from which to choose. In addition to the more traditional landscape plants, there are some 6000 species of plants native to the state of California. Many of these indigenous California plants grow well in the home landscape and garden.

In addition to their beauty, there are many benefits to using California native plants in the landscape. Native plants are typically drought tolerant and disease resistant. Therefore, once established, native plants require little water and no garden chemicals to keep them thriving. Native plants also provide abundant habitat for native birds, butterflies and other animals thereby creating an oasis of biodiversity right in the garden. Recent inventories indicate that one third of California's native flora is in danger of disappearing. By integrating native plants into our landscapes, we can help to restore this natural flora.

Most of us do not have room to reconstruct the forest in our backyards. Yet, with a little thought we might select the elements of the native flora that best fit our needs. For example, some yards might have room for one or two native trees such as live oak or box elder. However, many yards have enough room for a variety of shrubs and perennial wildflowers. Some examples are blue blossoms, huckleberry, ocean spray, monkey flower and wild rose. Native plants such as these provide abundant nectar and pollen for diverse insect life, are attractive nesting sites for birds, and provide fruit for wildlife year round.

The most adaptable plant community for a small garden is the native meadow. With our coastal climate, most of the grasses found in meadows are perennial bunchgrasses. Native bunchgrasses are very drought tolerant and remain green throughout the summer with little or no water. Bunchgrasses provide a diverse array of texture and color through which splashes of native wildflowers can be massed for varied beauty all year long. If placed in groups among shrubs or as an understory to trees, bunch grasses can provide living mulch that creates excellent protection from soil erosion.

There are many books on the subject of growing native plants, but two in particular are note worthy. The classic *Growing California Native Plants* by Marjorie Schmidt (UC Press, 1980) is an excellent resource for selecting native plants for every garden type. Also the more recent *Gardening with a Wild Heart* by Judith Larner (UC Press, 1999) is an inspirational guide to restoring California's native landscapes in the home garden.

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