

Local color

Native plants bring the region's natural beauty to your garden

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"Are you a native?" is a fun question to ask in social circles.

It's difficult to tell the difference among people, but in the plant world, California natives are highly respected and recognized as some of the most beautiful on the planet. People travel from far and wide to see vast communities of our native flora in peak bloom.

San Diego's coastal and chaparral regions are host to many incredible native plants: sky blue Ceanothus or wild lilac; silvery Artemisia or sagebrush; the majestic matilija poppy; colorful, spiky penstemons or beard tongues; and the awesome, yellow-flowering Fremontodendron or flannel bush, to name just a few.

Many California natives would be extinct by now, victims of decades of urban development, if it weren't for the dedication of specialized native plant growers and nurseries. Their efforts to cultivate these plants are not only an act of conservation but through them, they have made California native plants readily available to the public and our gardens.

Not all native plants are easily grown in a cultivated garden, especially when given supplemental water during the warm summer months. During our dry season from May to October or later, our gardens would be bone dry if it weren't for imported water, mainly from the Colorado River. Yet summer watering is what kills a California native plant faster than anything else.

As imported water resources begin to decline, we may need to take a closer look at native flora. These plants require much less water in a garden or landscape and are designed to survive our successive rainless months.

Years of growing and observing many of our native plants within a cultivated garden have helped us hone in on the ones easiest to grow there. This experience gives today's gardeners a better rate of success, as long they meet these plants' basic needs.

Several of these proven perennial native plants come from our own Southern California foothills and coastal regions as well as the most northern part of Baja California. They are well suited to our gardens and many give a very attractive seasonal flower display with the additional bonus of evergreen foliage.

Fall is a great time to plant these natives, allowing them to benefit from the winter rains and become established so they can put on a full flower display the following year.

Just as summer ends and fall begins is when our native *Zauschneria* (*Zowsh-ne-ree-a*) *californica* or California fuchsia begins to bloom. Its scarlet tubular flowers are a favorite source of nectar to hummingbirds during the display from August to November or later. Several cultivars of *Z. californica* available have flower



Bob Wigand photos

Coast sunflower (*Encelia californica*) is a long-blooming California native plant well suited to area gardens, as long as it doesn't get overwatered.



California native plants like California fuchsia (above), toyon and matilija poppy (below) are best planted in the fall to take advantage of our winter rains. All appreciate well-draining soil and limited water, especially on our naturally dry summer months.



colors ranging from bright orange to red or light pink.

The foliage is finely textured and silvery gray, giving an attractive presence when out of flower except during late winter when it prefers to go dormant. At that time, cut the foliage to within a few inches of the ground. This pruning will help shape it for the following year's new growth.

Reaching an average height of about 2 to 3 feet, California fuchsia spreads by underground runners, which makes it a garden friend or foe depending on the space allowed. Giving it room to naturalize as a ground cover would be one way to use it. I placed mine a few feet away from an old fashioned purple heliotrope (*Heliotropium arborescens*). Both plants bloom at the same time and create a mass of color late in the year.

Plant in full sun in well drained soil. Water requirements are low; water once or twice a month during the dry seasons. The more water it receives the more it will be encouraged to spread; to slow it down simply cut back on the water.

One of my favorite local natives is monkey flower (*Mimulus longiflorus*, sometimes listed as *Diplacus*). The tubular buff to yellow-orange flowers are so charming and showy; they attract hummingbirds, bees and butterflies like a magnet. The foliage is dark green, slender and slightly sticky to the touch.

Monkey flower is a woody perennial that reaches 3 to 4 feet tall and wide if its happy in its location, which should be full sun and well drained sandy loam or decomposed granite with a low organic content.

The flowering display is easily prolonged from spring into fall if the plant is cut back after the first bloom phase has finished and minimal water is applied. Otherwise monkey flower looks a bit scruffy from midsummer until the winter rains arrive.



The often available showy Verity hybrids, a cross between *M. longiflorus* and *M. aurantiacus*, have larger flowers and a wider range of colors, from pure white to copper, red and maroon, although I found them to be shorter lived than the pure species. If growing these showy hybrids be sure to place them in partial shade; all other *mimulus* appreciate full sun.

Mimulus aurantiacus ssp. *puniceus* blooms with three different colored /flowers at the same time, crimson red, orange rust and gold, and has proven to be long lived as long as it has sharp drainage and little water.

Combine monkey flower with other drought-tolerant natives or Mediterranean's that require minimal water. Compatible drought tolerant plants as lavender, statice (*Limonium perezii*) and gaura are attractive companions.

When I brought my first native sage or *salvia* home to plant in my garden my husband asked, "Why are you planting sagebrush in your garden?" That was at least 20 years ago and I still grow *Salvia clevelandii* in my garden because I think its one of the most beautiful native sages there is. I love it in flower and out of flower; I even like its pungent aromatic foliage.

My husband's knowledge of this plant dates back to his youth when he and his friends would hike from their neighborhood in the hills of Altadena into the San Gabriel mountains directly behind their homes. There, they would play King Of The Mountain, throwing each other off an embankment into the brush below. When they eventually returned home, they reeked of native sages.



Today, numerous cultivars have been developed from *S. clevelandii*. A favorite is Winnifred Gilman, a more compact plant with profuse dark violet blue flowers that grows to a moderate 3 feet tall and wide.

Salvia clevelandii

is usually about 4 feet tall and wide, with a blooming display of softer lavender blue flowers around its upright stalks from early spring until early summer. The rest of the year, the plant shows off its lovely gray foliage and become a good background plant for summer or fall blooming annuals, perennials and bulbs.

Plant these *salvias* in well drained soil, in full sun. Although they will survive on very little water during our dry months, they are much more attractive if given ample water at least twice a month. They will accept this water well as long as they have good drainage.

Also worth mentioning are a couple of ground cover *salvia* hybrids of unknown origin, *Salvia Gracias* and *Salvia Bee's Bliss*. No one seems to know their true parentage – a good mystery for DNA analysis to solve.

The two plants are extremely similar, growing less than a foot high and spreading outward 6 to 8 feet or more. The beautiful lavender blue flowers arch upward, making it a must to use for erosion control. Let it gracefully spill down embankment, cascade over retaining walls or fill a hanging basket.

Las Pilitas Nursery, which specializing in California native plants, is the only place I know that is cultivating these mysterious ground cover *salvia* hybrids. Las Pilitas is located at 8331 Nelson Way in Escondido. Call (760) 749-5930 for directions.

Two other very worthy native perennials that mix well with just about everything, given full sun and sharp drainage, are coast sunflower (*Encelia californica*) and woolly blue curls (*Trichostema lanatum*).

The cheery yellow daisies of *Encelia californica* are, in my opinion, far more appealing than a typical yellow marguerite. The dark green foliage sets off the loose lemon yellow flowers held slightly above the 2-to 3-foot-tall shrublet. Coast sunflower goes with everything and blooms over many months, as long as it doesn't get overwatered. It is fast growing and only needs cutting back in late fall or early winter to within a foot to allow new foliage to emerge for the following year.

Woolly blue curls is equally long blooming with dramatic spikes of deep purple velvety flowers surrounding its long bloom stalks. With the same overall size and culture as coast sunflower, woolly blue curls would make a stunning companion to it. Other attributes of this plant are that it has evergreen, mint-scented foliage and is a favorite of hummingbirds and butterflies.

It would be difficult to list all the wonderful, flowering California native perennials and shrubs that helps give a garden a high level of substance, one that is wildlife friendly and encompasses conservation. From the low-growing blue-eyed grass (*Sisyrinchium bellum*) to the towering berry laden toyon (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*), the choices are many.

Many nurseries usually have wide selection of California natives year round. One of the larger native plant nurseries is Tree of Life, located north of San Diego in San Juan Capistrano (www.treeoflifenuresery.com).

The important thing is to try these environmentally friendly plants and in doing so develop an understanding of how simple their basic needs really are. The reward of their contribution to the garden is well worth it.

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