

GETTING STARTED WITH CALIFORNIA NATIVES

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Bringing Back the Natives Garden Tour

Today I will talk about the best way to get acquainted with California native plants and how to decide what to use in your landscape. There are many local resources for classes, botanic gardens to see the plants in the ground, and Web sources that are very helpful.

First, what is a native plant? It is a plant that evolved in this area and needs no help from man to survive. California has its own very distinct native flora, with a high number of natives for the state. The Sierra Nevada range kept California isolated from the rest of the continent, so many plants evolved here and nowhere else. Think of the Coastal Redwood-this is the only place on the planet that this tree lives.

The wonderful thing about natives is that they were meant to live naturally in our very unique climate. California has what is known as a Mediterranean climate: wet winters, long, dry summers. Only 6% of the world has the same kind of climate, so most of the ornamental plants in nurseries aren't meant to grow here. That means that they require water during the summer, need fertilizers in order to look good, and can harbor pests that require the use of chemicals to kill. Natives use less water, don't take a lot of soil preparation, attract beneficial insects that eat the pests, and bring birds to your yard. They generally need much less maintenance through the year, too.

Many people think that native gardens aren't "pretty enough." We hope to dispel that notion today with this garden tour.

When I bought this house 5 years ago, the hill was covered in large black acacia trees (native to Australia, but naturalized – or reproducing – well here in California), and scrubby fruit trees (on a north-facing slope, with too little sun for them to do well). It was pretty ugly. The large trees made the yard and house dark, and the whole hill was steep, unusable space. The challenge was figuring out what to do with it that would not require too much maintenance or water in the future, and would provide a nice place to sit and enjoy the outdoors. What to plant?

Fortunately, I enrolled in a native shrub class at the Academy of Science in San Francisco, and the light bulb went on. Natives were a perfect solution to my particular site, and so the learning started.

There are many ways to get started with native landscaping. If you just want the plants and don't want a long learning curve, hire a landscape designer who specializes in natives. A designer can provide a one-or-two hour-long consultation – where they provide advice on what you can do, or they can plan and install the hardscape, select appropriate plants, do the planting, and maintain it. We have many talented people in the area to choose from. Many are listed on the website

<http://www.bringbackthenatives.net> under “Find a Native Plant Landscape Designer.” Many of these designers are giving discount consultations to ***Bringing Back the Natives Garden Tour*** participants. Every garden description on the tour includes information on who designed and installed the garden.

By hiring a professional a garden can be planned and installed in a finite amount of time. If you want it all now, this is the way to go. If your timeline is longer and your budget smaller, then learn the plants and go about it slowly and gradually, as I did.

I did a combination of using a professional, Lyn Talkowsky, for help with the design and with plant choices. I also took classes and did a lot of reading. The hardscape and large shrubs and trees were planted in 2002. I have been adding things over the years, and have moved things around, as well. The meadow was installed this spring. I have done things as I could afford to, and as I have learned about them.

The first thing that you have to do is figure out your site requirements: sunny or shady, steep or flat, clay or sand. Those things will help determine what plants will go in. There are also natural plant communities associated with particular amounts of rainfall, soil, and orientation. At <http://www.bringingbackthenatives.net/>, under “Gardening with Natives Useful Information,” you can download a list of “Easy to Grow Native Plants” that are divided into sunny, shady, wet, or dry conditions. Here, I have a mixed oak-hardwood grassland, but one that is north-facing. There are many classifications of plant communities, and sometimes you have to put 1 or 2 together because you are on an edge.

Here is where your eyes and your feet can really help. Take walks in our East Bay Parks, and try to find places that are similar to what you have. Nature (and the list of “Easy to Grow Natives”) will tell you what plants live with each other. Learning about native plants also opens your eyes to a whole new experience of the environment around us.

HERE ARE SOURCES FOR CLASSES LOCALLY:

Regional Parks Botanic Garden, through Friends of the Regional Parks Botanic Garden

<http://www.nativeplants.org/>

Merritt College Landscape Horticulture Department

<http://www.merrittlandhort.com/>

San Francisco Botanical Garden at Strybing

<http://www.strybing.org/>

California Academy of Science

<http://www.calacademy.org/>

California Native Plant Society-East Bay Chapter

(<http://www.ebcnps.org/>) Also has monthly organized plant walks in the East Bay parks with local plant experts

Larner Seeds

<http://www.larnerseeds.com/>

Any classes taught by **Glenn Keator**. Glenn is a local botanist and educator who is probably one of the most knowledgeable about local natives and how to grow them. He teaches at many of the places mentioned above.

BOOKS AND PUBLICATIONS:

The Gardener's Guide to Native Plants of the East Bay: A Home Companion to Growing Native Plants in Alameda and Contra Costa Counties, Anne Hayes and Shannah Anderson, The Aquatic Outreach Institute-Available from the Watershed Project for \$5.00. This is the best little book to get started with.

Plants and Landscapes for Summer-Dry Climates of the San Francisco Bay Area, **EBMUD**, 2004. A beautiful book and an invaluable resource, available in bookstores and the EBMUD website.

Gardening with a Wild Heart: Restoring California's Native Landscapes at Home, Judith Larner Lowery, UC Press. This is a wonderful book that is a practical and philosophical inspiration for any gardener.

Growing California Native Plants, Marjorie Schmidt, UC Press.

Plants of the San Francisco Bay Region, Mendocino to Monterey, Revised Edition 2004; Linda Beidleman and Eugene N. Kozloff. Most of the text is a key, but the pictures are wonderful, and help identify plants you find in the field.

Trees and Shrubs of California, John Stuart and John Sawyer, UC Press. Good for identification, habitats, and some growing information.

Wild Lilies, Irises, and Grasses – Gardening with California Monocots, Nora Harlow and Kristin Jacobs, Editors, UC Press, 2003. One of the few books devoted to gardening with Cal natives, and beautifully done, too.

Yerba Buena Chapter of the California Native Plant Society Website-

<http://www.cnps-yerbabuena.org/> has several good articles on locally appropriate plants in the gardening section of the website.