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The Native Garden in Winter

By Arvind Kumar

Have you noticed the gardening articles in the daily paper becoming sparser during the winter months? This is the season when garden writers and editors, many accustomed to East Coast and northern European seasonal cycles, retreat indoors, fuss over their houseplants, and dream of spring.

What they don't know is that in California winter is the season of regeneration and growth. This is the time when holes are easily dug, seeds germinate readily, and new plantings take root without fuss. This is why winter is the busiest time of year for the experienced native gardener. Here is a checklist for my seven-year-old native garden in San Jose:

Plant new plants. Winter moisture minimizes transplant trauma and improves chances of success. You can work the soil as long as it is not water-logged.

Scatter wildflower seeds at the base of established shrubs.

Place potted dudleyas out on the patio where they can catch the rain and puff up.

Cut back yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) to the ground to promote fresh, new growth.

Cut back the Douglas iris (*Iris douglasiana*) to the ground, making sure not to damage the tender rhizomes.

Remove dry stalks and leaves of hummingbird sage (*Salvia spathacea*).

Cut to the ground the stalks of these summer bloomers: California fuchsia (*Epilobium canum*), California aster (*Aster chilensis*), narrow-leaved milkweed (*Asclepias fascicularis*), and togluaca (*Datura wrightii*).

Remove dead stems of sword fern (*Polystichum munitum*) for neatness and to promote new growth.

Cut back cool season grasses like purple needlegrass (*Nassella pulchra*) and California fescue (*Festuca californica*) to a few inches above ground.

Prune the sticky monkeyflower (*Mimulus aurantiacus*) for desired height and width. Stick cuttings into the ground or in pots to produce new plants.

Reduce the purple sage (*Salvia leucophylla*) in volume by half to keep it at a manageable size for the small garden. Cuttings root easily.

Prune shrubs like toyon (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*) and coffeeberry (*Rhamnus californica*), golden currant (*Ribes aureum gracillimum*), and pink-flowering currant (*Ribes sanguineum glutinosum*) for size and dense habit.

Be vigilant in pulling weeds before they reseed.

Pick snails and slugs which can decimate young native plants like lupines, dudleyas, and Chinese houses. Persistent picking (late night or early morning) can significantly reduce their populations within a few seasons.

Winter is not just all work, either. This is the time to enjoy the fragrant blooms of the chaparral currant (*Ribes malvaceum*). This is when the silver catkins of the silk tassel bush (*Garrya elliptica*) make it a standout garden element. This is when the pendant red flowers of the fuchsia-flowered gooseberry (*Ribes speciosum*) attract hummingbirds as well as appreciative humans. This is when manzanitas (*Arctostaphylos spp*) of all kinds – shrubs, subshrubs, and groundcovers – fairly twinkle in a stellar display of tiny white flowers.

A California native garden in winter has endless possibilities for work and for enjoyment.

Arvind Kumar tends a garden of over 100 species of native plants in San Jose. Arvind's garden can be seen on the annual Going Native Garden Tour, <http://www.goingnativegardentour.org/>