

# California Native Plants Questions and Answers

## WHY PLANT CALIFORNIA NATIVES?

California native plants are beautiful; they require less water than exotic plants; they attract local birds and butterflies; they are easy to maintain; and, they serve as icons of California's wild places.

## HOW DO I GROW NATIVES?

There are no special tricks involved, in fact, since they are natives, their growth patterns conform to southern California rainfall patterns better than most imported species. Once established, they often can survive within our cycle of wet winters and dry summers. Natives grow well without the use of any pesticides, fertilizers or herbicides. If you do want to "nudge" your plants to make them grow faster, you can fertilize in the fall, winter and spring with any commercial fertilizer - just use one-half the recommended dose. Since they aren't used to it, a little fertilizer goes a long way. When first planting natives, prepare the soil as you would for any plant. Dig a hole at least twice the size of the container, and mix in organic material about half and half with native soil. Plant at the same level the plant is in the can (don't bury the plant too deep) and top dress with a half inch of any mulch or planter mix. Soak in thoroughly when planting. If planting in the summer or early fall, be careful not to over water. With natives it is better to err on the side of under watering than over watering during this period, but don't let newly established plants get "bone dry". While becoming established, natives may wilt during the heat of the day, but if they "pop back" at night, you know they have sufficient moisture.

## CAN I GROW NATIVES IN CONTAINERS?

Yes! Just follow the above guiding principles, with the exception that containers tend to dry out faster, so one has to monitor the watering more closely. Even just a pot on a balcony can be a reminder of "things wild" and also may attract local butterflies that will be pleasantly surprised to find a nectar source they recognize.

## DO NATIVES GET "WEEDY," REQUIRING EXTENSIVE MAINTENANCE?

Like exotic species, some natives grow extremely fast while others grow only inches a year. Water, fertilization, exposure to the sun, soil type and drainage all have an effect on how fast a species will grow. Natives respond to pruning like any other plant, meaning you can generally control the size and shape. Here at the Center we have over 180 different species, most of which are slow to medium growers. To keep as many species as possible on display, we do selectively hand prune some of the faster growing species, but the amount of labor is minimal. On average, we only spend about an hour a week maintaining this half-acre parcel.

## WHY DON'T LOCAL CITIES, PARKS, GREENBELTS AND HOMEOWNERS USE NATIVE SPECIES?

Very good question! The answer is mostly one of education. Landscape architects are generally not trained in the use of native species, and even though they are typically easier to grow than non-natives, there is a "fear of the unknown" that causes architects to specify known (although generally unimaginative and water-intensive) landscapes. Acorn Naturalists is one of the first commercial facilities in Southern California to go 100% native and we will let you be the judge of how it looks. Progressive, cost-conscious cities are becoming more aware of the value of natives in terms of water conservation, low maintenance requirements, and elimination of need for pesticides and herbicides.

## WHAT CAN I DO TO ENCOURAGE BROADER ACCEPTANCE OF NATIVES?

You can also set an example by growing some natives in your garden, whether in a pot on your balcony or a plot of land. You can send letters to your local representatives (city councils, planning commissions, etc) asking them to consider increased use of California natives in their plantings. You can also become involved in organizations such as the regional chapters of the California Native Plant Society; visit native plant collections such as Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden in Claremont. You can also visit Acorn Naturalists Center in Tustin, landscaped entirely with native plants.

**Acorn Naturalists**  
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