



WHY GROW NATIVE CALIFORNIA PLANTS?

by Louise Lacey



The concept of using native California plants for everything from backyard gardening to widescale revegetation is the most important and promising idea in plant ecology today. It's positive consequences are immense, and we don't even know their full extent.

But just to name a few:

1. Costs are much lower, for several reasons.

- No soil preparation is necessary -- not even plowing or rototilling. Weeds, however, must be removed through pulling, burning and/or judicious use of low-impact herbicides such as Roundup (if you decide to do that).
- Because they are adapted to leaner, dryer landscapes than found in "typical" California gardening conditions, natives never need fertilizing, cultivating, irrigating once they are established.
- Pruning is also minimal, because natives usually grow to their mature form, and then stay that size (like people), whereas hybrid plants continue growing forever (like cancer.) About 1/5 of our landfill is garden prunings.
- While initial maintenance is more intensive (those pesky weeds), long term maintenance is extremely low because once a native plant community is established, weeds can't get in.

2. Native flora brings native fauna. Not only does this mean habitat for human-appreciated critters like birds and butterflies, but more invisible yet more important creatures such as insects.

California, for example, has nearly 1000 species of bees and wasps, many of whom have a single plant species as their nectar source. If that plant isn't growing somewhere the bee can find it, the pollinator has no food; once it is gone the plant can never again reproduce, no matter how many seeds may be discovered somewhere in a warehouse.

And because native plants grow in organic conditions, the insect balance is restored. The need for pesticides disappears. On a higher level of the food chain, small mammals also return. More gophers mean more owls, etc.

3. When native plants are growing together in their own plant community configuration, without fertilizer and cultivation, the soil regains its health. Everything from earthworms to beneficial bacteria return.

Most importantly, the natural mutually beneficial relationship between soil fungi and plant roots -- called mycorrhizae -- is restored. Mycorrhizae is the mechanism whereby plants derive nutrients and moisture from lean, dry soils -- and the fungi get the benefit of the plant's ability to photosynthesize. (You may be familiar with the discovery a few years ago of a single enormous underground fungus found in a Michigan forest, called the largest living plant in the world -- until an even larger one was found in the forest of Oregon.)

Why Grow Native California Plants? cont.

The underground ecology is just as important as that above ground. Standard horticultural (and agricultural) practices destroy that ecology with cultivation and fertilizer, not to mention herbicides and pesticides.

4. Perhaps the most overlooked consequence of using native California plants is the esthetic benefit. The human appreciation of “wilderness” as beautiful is incalculable. What is the picture on your calendar?

5. And finally, on this very short list culled from a very much larger one, **consider the impact that growing native plants has on the human heart and spirit**, something I have learned about in the course of publishing Growing Native.

If a visit to a park or other natural area is perceived as beautiful and spiritually refreshing, imagine what happens to people who actually participate in the healing of a patch of earth. It doesn't matter if they are backyard gardeners who do everything themselves or maintenance people on a large revegetation project; the process is the same.

On a rational level, someone healing the earth knows he or she is doing something enormously positive. It is an upbeat activity prevailing against a tide of chronic bad news. On a deeper level, a bond is forged with the planet. Something happens inside, an awareness grows of a profound connection. People who have personally experienced that connection with the wholeness of life on the earth cannot thereafter be any part of its violation. It's a permanent change in consciousness.

Everett Butts, a native plant oldtimer living in the foothills of the Sierra, east of Sacramento, puts it this way:

“What nature is doing on its own I'm doing with it. I tell people I have an affair with the land going here. It's damned important to me. It's part of my substance, my living and breathing. What I feel here is the earth and what flies and walks over it and burrows under it. The more I feel and see and understand, the more I like it.”

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The Sacramento Valley Chapter of the California Native Plant Society, has meetings featuring speakers, books and seeds for sale on the second Wednesday of the month, September through June (except December). Meetings take place at 7pm at the Shepards Garden and Arts Center in McKinley Park, 3330 McKinley Boulevard, Sacramento. The CNPS Sacramento Valley Chapter Plant Sale is the fourth Saturday of September at the Shepard Garden and Arts Center. Visit the website at www.cnpssacvalley.org for more information and contacts.