



Gardening with a Mediterranean Thumb

By Alice Cantelow

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You've probably heard the term "Mediterranean climate" bandied about. Yes, that is the official name for the pattern of cool, wet (usually) winters and hot, dry summers found in our area below about 3,000 feet. But did you know just how rare our climate is? In the whole world, only California west of the Sierra and Mojave Desert, countries around the Mediterranean Sea, and small parts of South Africa, Chile and Australia have this climate.

Gardening here, then, is not like gardening in England, Kansas, or even Arizona, where they actually receive summer rain. So why not embrace our climate, create gardens that make sense here, and focus on plants adapted to this kind of weather?

First, let's focus on low-water use plants: a key is to get them established first. That usually takes one to two growing seasons of regular water. Remember, the pots have not allowed the roots to grow well and you need to give plants water until the roots have grown out and down to gain enough moisture on their own. Fall is generally the best time to plant shrubs, trees, and perennials, as long as you remember to water the first summer or even two.

Rosemary and lavender are two plants from the Mediterranean basin that thrive here: they even aren't eaten by deer. Other beautiful Mediterranean shrubs that need little or no summer water are rockrose, santolina, and Jerusalem sage. These all have a profuse show of flowers in spring and/or summer.

You may recognize some of these easy-care plants from other Mediterranean climate countries: Amaryllis (*Hippeastrum*), Zebra aloe, and Cape Plumbago (*Plumbago capensis*) from South Africa; Eucalyptus (frost intolerant) and Kangaroo paw (*Anigozanthos*) from Southwestern Australia, and rock purslane (*Calandrinia umbellata*) from Chile.

Last but definitely not least are our own California native plants. Not only are many of these well-adapted to our foothill climate, they are also adapted to our unique and diverse fauna.

California wild lilac (Ceanothus), inland (not island) bush poppy (Papaver), flannel bush (Fremontodendron), Matilija poppy (Romneya coulteri), and Western redbud (Cercis) are all spectacular flowering shrubs that grow in foothill gardens without supplemental water once established. There are also many native perennials to consider such as milkweed (Asclepias subulata), western goldenrod (Solidago), foothill Penstemon, and coyote mint (Monardella villosa). As the number of native California plants grows in your garden, so too will the numbers and diversity of songbirds, butterflies, native bees, and other beneficial insects.

These are just a smattering of the long list of plants adapted to Mediterranean climates, the diversity of which is much larger than the small size of land they are native to would suggest. California alone has more than 6,000 native plant species, most of which are low-water use. Some places to start researching plants are http://arboretum.ucdavis.edu/plant_search.aspx ; and <http://slobg.org/our-gardens/what-we-grow/>

A garden full of low-water use plants adapted to our climate will save you money, precious water resources, and time. Best of all the plants will be resilient to the droughts that frequent our state. Choosing plants native to dry areas of California will also give your garden a sense of place, as well as providing habitat for the diverse wildlife we share these wonderful Sierra foothills with.

There is no Master Gardener class this Saturday, May 3, 2014. Master Gardeners will be on hand to answer questions at the annual Home and Garden Show this weekend at the fairgrounds. Master Gardeners are also available to answer home gardening questions at their office Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon. Call [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512) or walk-ins are welcome, we're located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.