

Natives for Spring Planting

by Mary Anderson

Spring is definitely here, and many of us are anxious to get our hands into the soil. On Saturday, April 6, UCCE Master Gardeners of Tuolumne County will host an Open Garden Day focusing on the care and pruning of all kinds of berries. Along with the free demonstrations and educational talks, they will host their first plant sale of the year, including some California natives.

But, wait, we've been taught that native plants need to be put into the ground in the fall. Why buy natives in the spring? While it is true that many native plants prefer to be fall planted, there are many that do as well, if not better, when planted in the spring. You have to look mainly at the natural habitat a plant prefers to understand why.

Many deciduous shrubs, riparian and woodland species thrive when planted in the spring. They are adapted to more moderate summer conditions, with greater moisture either from summer rain or their situation in deeper soils along water courses. Also, plants growing at higher elevations undergo a winter rather than summer dormant season.

Examples of these plants are California bay, bigleaf maple, *Philadelphus* or mock orange, spicebush, ninebark, cedars, redwoods and dogwoods. Perennials suitable for woodland or moist gardens are columbine, bleeding heart, monkeyflowers, ferns, fringe cups, iris, wild ginger and the leopard lily.

Many lower elevation native perennials do well in a garden setting also. The foothill penstemon, Achillea or yarrow, slender cinquefoil or Potentilla, the heucheras or alum roots, blue flax, Erigeron or seaside daisies, and lupine like a sunny garden setting and supplemental water. And our all-time favorite, the California poppy, responds to a little extra care with a much longer bloom period than in the wild.

One of the main reasons I prefer spring planting for some species is to use the plant as a "mother" or source of seed. I have not had much luck broadcasting poppy seeds to get a patch going. But planting a few mother plants and weeding a bit to control competition has rewarded my efforts by a vigorous seeding. I've gotten patches of poppies, bush lupine, California bee plant (*Scrophularia californica*), the native purple or foothill needle grasses, blue flax and shooting star to naturalize nicely by tending a few mother plants. The seeds that are released into the soil are fresh and acclimatized to sprout when conditions are favorable (and not when I finally remember that I've saved them and put them out).

Certain plants respond nicely to being "pushed" at first to get them off to a stronger start. Redbuds are slow growing, but a few years of extra water, mulch and even a bit of compost will get the shrub to flower years before one just left to tough it out. Incense cedars can grow quite fast if tended for a few years. When they get to the size I want, especially if they are used for screening, I leave them alone to adapt to more natural conditions, perhaps only weeding and mulching them a little. This practice works for most shrubs that I try to naturalize—the

Philadelphus, ocean spray or Holodiscus, mountain mahogany, clematis, elderberry, toyon and sugarbush (Rhus ovata).

One other consideration is the appearance (and fire resistance) of a plant that is treated to some summer care in the landscape. I water the Carpenteria, ceanothus, salvias, and spicebush deeply but infrequently in the landscaping closer to my house than I do those plants farther out in the natural areas. The major concern here is to provide good drainage to avoid the hot wet soils in summer that support root rot and fungus.

One final excuse for spring planting is just the pure joy of the season. It takes a truly disciplined and committed gardener to want to continue planting in the fall, after being exhausted by the endless dry summer. But everyone is compelled to jump in and celebrate the promise of spring by planting. Nothing makes me happier than to see a little kid walk off with a pack of poppies to try their hand at the magic of gardening! My lifelong garden adventure began one balmy spring day at the age of four with the gift of a few marigolds.

Come make friends with some of the wonderful plants just waiting to jump into your gardens! Open Garden Day is held at the Tuolumne County Master Gardener Demonstration Garden on the campus of Cassina High School, 251 South Barretta Street, Sonora, CA. The garden is open from 10 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., with demonstrations and talks beginning at 10:30.

Mary Anderson, a Calaveras County gardener, has spent the last 30 years getting to know California native plants on her 10-acre property and propagates many native plants from the seeds of her 'mother plants.'

UCCE Master Gardeners of Tuolumne and Calaveras Counties can answer home gardening questions. Call 209-533-5912 or go to: <http://ucanr.edu/survey/survey.cfm?surveynumber=7269> to fill out our easy-to-use problem questionnaire. Check out our website at: http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.edu/Master_Gardeners/ You can also find us on Facebook.