

How I Got Started Gardening With Native Plants

By

Al Kyte

I first heard about gardening with California native plants in Gladys Smith's 1972 class "Attracting Birds to your Yard." Immediately I knew I wanted to surround myself with the types of plants I enjoyed when hiking or fly fishing in the back country. So 40 years ago I began my project-by-project transformation of our suburban garden. Ideas came from reading, visiting botanic gardens (frequently the Regional Parks Botanic Garden), attending plant sales, and talking with knowledgeable people, including Lester Hawthorne, Wayne Roderick, Glen Schneider, and Phil Johnson. Yet I have been most influenced by the beautiful arrangements I have found in nature itself, which inspired me to work with plants, rock, soil, and water to create what I can.

Although I currently have over 150 species of California natives, I avoid crowding them by following the Japanese tradition of maintaining a balance between space taken up by plants, rocks, and water (or the suggestion of water). Ultimately, I do not want to feel I am in a garden, but in a chaparral along a stream, or in open woodland.

Our chaparral is in the front yard. In addition to various species of manzanita, this walk-through shrub area includes chamise, sage, yerba santa, coffeeberry, and woolly blue curls as well as flowers such as poppies, penstemon, verbena, and buckwheat. Although the shrubs are dominant in this "moment in time," several sun-loving knobcone pines will soon emerge through to set up the next stage of plant succession. A dry streambed runs along one side of our garden. I have accentuated its riparian feel with various maples, mountain alders, mountain ash, and dogwood, as well as iris, shooting star, phacelia, and seep monkey flowers.

The backyard is our open woodland. Flat wildflower areas give way to tall shrubs such as toyon, spice bush, and coast silktassel as well as small trees like shore pine, mountain mahogany, and madrone. I have added a stream that tumbles down through offset falls, a meander, a shallow riffle, and

into a pond where fish and turtles live. Beyond is a backdrop of taller pi and redwoods. This is a place for birds. Open woodlands provide nesting cover, and feeding options for many species. Dense shrubbery suits red hermit thrush and spotted towhees, while open areas appeal to quail, doves, and bluebirds. A variety of low flowering plants bring hummingbirds, bees, bees, butterflies, and ground-feeding birds. Bird baths and feeders, nest houses, the shallow riffle, brush piles, dust bath areas, and abundant cover have helped to attract over ninety bird species, even thrashers, tanagers, black-throated gray warblers.

This is a yard for animals as well. Rock outcroppings, wood piles, and sand areas have added habitat for resident sharp-tailed snakes, fence lizards, and slender salamanders. Frequent visitors include deer, skunks, raccoons, gopher snakes, fox squirrels, and other small mammals. This is a garden for children. Rocks can be thrown into the stream, castles built, buried treasure found in sand piles, and climbing done on slopes, trees, rock outcroppings. I even have a native plant "jungle gym" where our granddaughter takes a dozen steps through manzanita branches without touching her feet to the ground.

Finally, it is a garden for experiencing peace. At times, only the sounds of falling water and singing birds interrupt the silence. We know that native plant gardens benefit the animals and environment in many ways, but they can also be wonderful places for children and adults to enjoy the simple natural things and renew perspective.

--Al Kyte