



NICHE GARDENING

SHADE-LOVING NATIVE PLANTS

Joan Pont, Avid Gardener

Sloat Seminar

March 15, 2025

GARDENING IS THE BEST HOBBY IN THE WORLD

1. You can create beauty in your garden. Given time and expertise, you can do this on a shoestring budget
2. You will increase biodiversity in your environment
3. You will even help climate disruption by drawing down CO₂!



Seeds of Hooker's Evening Primrose rescued from a gravel parking lot

GOALS

1. Increase awareness of where plants *want* to grow
2. Knowledge about resources to find right plant for a challenging space
3. Reduce gardening frustration with higher success rate



Fragrant Pitcher Sage likes part shade

TAKE A HIKE

Not right now! Wait until
after the talk

Notice abrupt changes in
the plants within just a
few feet

Is there a swath of
poppies, then none?

Miner's Lettuce might
appear



Point Lobos State Natural Reserve. Photo Joan Pont

WALK AROUND YOUR HOME

South exposure: Sun beating down all day

East exposure: Morning sun

West exposure: Sunset viewing

North exposure: Shade all day



PLANTS CAN'T WALK

Where a seed germinates
is where it is going to
grow

Seed dispersal may be
up to the winds
(maple), birds (oak),
ants (violets), luck

Dog Violet, photo John Doyen



Maple seed,
Samara or
Helicopter,
flutters away



Coast Live Oak,
photo Neal Kramer

INSURANCE POLICY

Some plants create millions of seeds to insure one plant reaches maturity to replace it

The remaining seeds are not wasted: food for birds & other animals, lie in wait for years and then germinate, or decompose to humus



Arroyo willow, *Salix lasiolepis*

BUT YOU DON'T HAVE TO PLANT A MILLION SEEDS

Webinars, like this one

Websites like Sloat's and calscape.org

Right place right plant “niche gardening” books

Sun 6+ hours of direct sun/day	Shade Dappled to dark shade
Dry Intermittent water, down to monthly	Moist 1-2 per week

FOUR BUCKETS



Sun/Dry

Sun/Moist

Shade/Dry

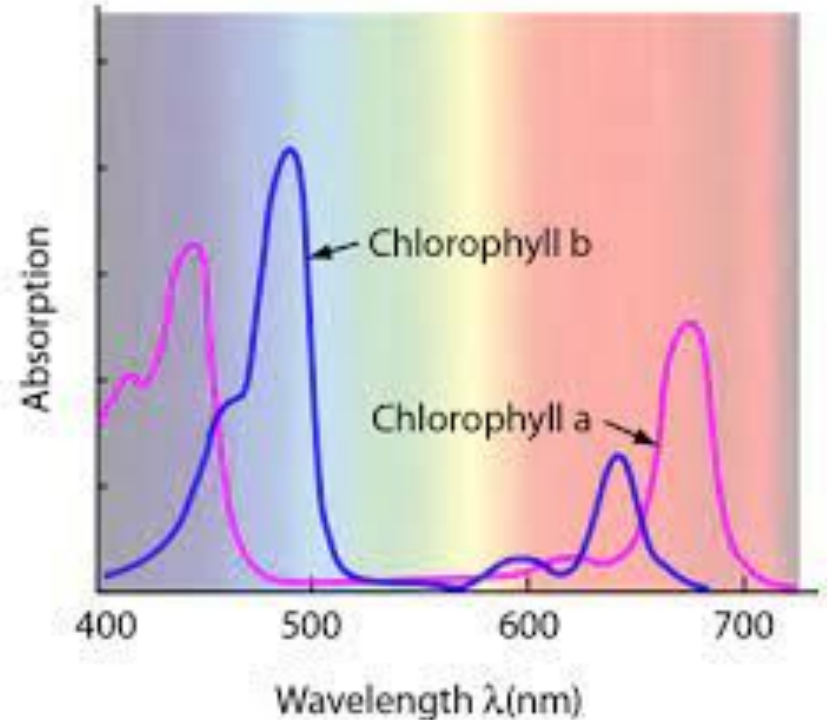
Shade/Moist

Unicorn plants: happy in dry shade

EVOLUTION: TAKING ADVANTAGE OF A NICHE

All plants need sun,
but some developed
adaptations to need
less

If you can find an
unoccupied niche, you
win



Plants don't even need GREEN light!
<http://hyperphysics.phy-astr.gsu.edu/>

ADAPTATIONS TO SHADE

Dark green leaves - lots of chlorophyll to catch any light

Large thin leaves - everything is close to the surface

Slower Growing - less pruning!

Timing - early annuals pop out before trees leaf out

“Mother plants” support growth through root connections



SHADY BUT BARE - LET'S FIX THAT

Low Ground Covers

Shrubs

Accent Beauties

Double Duty - berries
for birds, host plants
for caterpillars that
turn into butterflies



Oaks are considered keystone species

"YERBA BUENA" BECAME "SAN FRANCISCO" IN 1847

Meet the plant named Yerba Buena, low growing shade tolerant mint originally found all over SF and the Bay Area

Here, draping over a container, can also provide very low ground cover in your garden



Yerba Buena, "Good Herb," *Clinopodium douglasii*. Photo Joan Pont

SHADE-TOLERANT SALVIA?

Yep, I know of one, whereas usually salvias, or sages, need very sunny dry sites

Hummingbird Sage, *Salvia spathacea*, low growing with knee-high flower spikes. Leaves smell wonderful



Hummingbird Sage, calscape.org, photo Steve Matson

THINK HEUCHERA

Heuchera Maxima, Island Alum Root, and other Heucheras

Related to Coral Bells

Remarkably *unattractive* to snails!

Does not spread, stays where you plant them



Island Alum Root, calscape.org, photo Stan Shebs

PART SHADE?

Seaside Daisy, *Erigeron glaucus*, drapes over a low wall at the dripline of an oak.

Low growing perennial needs watering only monthly, and can get by on no supplemental irrigation as all!



TOUGH BUNCH GRASSES AND SEDGES

Many species in
California

Special features: Some
live hundreds of years,
roots 20' deep, erosion
control, takes foot
traffic as a lawn
substitute



No Mow Prairie: *Festuca idahoensis*, *F rubra*, *F occidentalis*

SHRUB (NOT THE COCKTAIL KIND)

California Native Ribes are
gooseberries that birds love

Ribes sanguineum glutinosum,
or Pink Flowering Currant, is
a mouthful but gorgeous.

My front yard in an otherwise
nearly flowerless February

Appeared in my garden, extant
native? Photo Joan Pont



RIBES VIBURNIFOLIUM, CATALINA CURRENT

Shiny dark green evergreen groundcover, happy under oaks

Nature benefits: birds enjoy berries, caterpillars munch on leaves

Remember: birds feed caterpillars to their chicks, and ones not eaten turn into butterflies and moths



APTLY NAMED SNOWBERRY

Low growing deciduous shrub with startlingly white berries in winter

Eaten by birds but saved for last because of their bland taste. Even birds have taste



Symphoricarpos albus, photo Joan Pont

BIG GREEN BLOB

It's not easy being green, Kermit
the Frog

Big Green Blobs can serve important
roles in the garden

Sit behind a show stopper to show
it off

Sit in front to hide a neighbor's
rusted RV

Coffeeberry, *Frangula californica*,
nothing to do with coffee, just
a passing resemblance

Birds and foxes love the berries



SHOWSTOPPER: DOUGLAS IRIS

Look carefully. See the baby oak seedling next to the iris? They are under a huge oak

Slowly spreading via rhizomes, this early spring flower always stops me in my tracks



Iris douglasiana, photo Joan Pont

SUN VERSUS SHADE SITES FOR FLOWERS



Left: Confluent flowers coat the hillside in the spring with a sunny site

Right: Exquisite single flowers are found in the deep forest, trading quality for quantity



Meadowfoam, *Limnanthes douglasii*, Photo Larner Seeds

Fetid Adderstongue, *Scoliopus bigelovii*, Armstrong woods

JURASSIC PARK LOOK - FERNS

There is a reason ferns remind you of dinosaurs: they did coexist!

Many choices, but the sizable Western Sword Fern, *Polystichum munitum*, adds drama. And deer resistant too



Western Sword Fern, calscape.org, photo Barry Rice

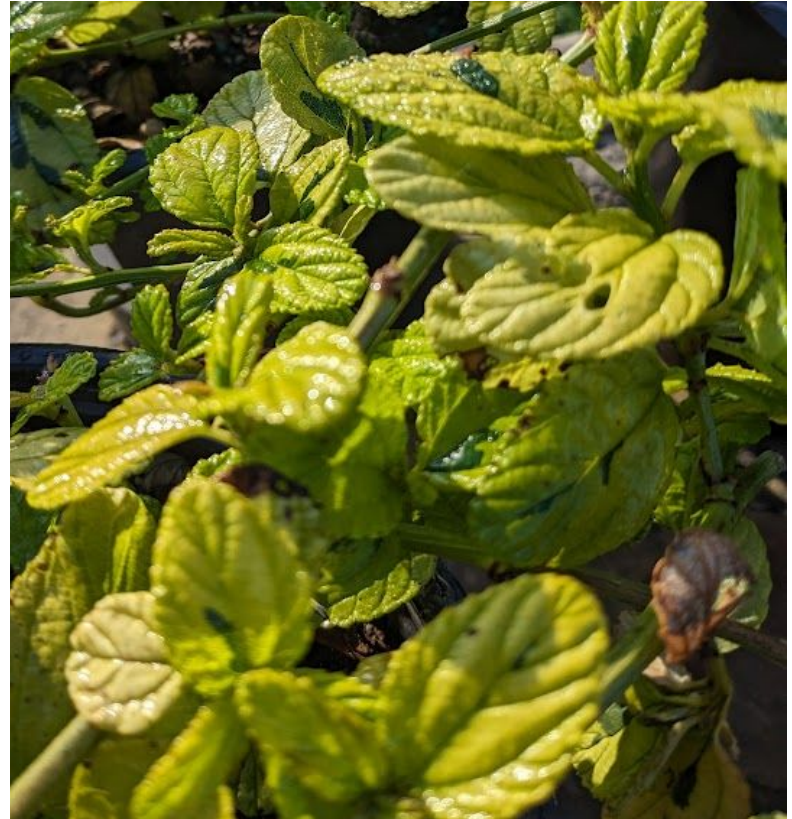
LIGHT COLOR IN THE SHADE - CEANOOTHUS DIAMOND HEIGHTS

Most shade tolerant and shade loving plants have dark green foliage - an adaptation to low light

This oddball tolerates light shade but has light colored leaves

Found in the Diamond Heights neighborhood of SF in 1985, the rest is horticultural history

Chartreuse & dark green leaves



LIGHT IN THE SHADE - WHITE FLOWERS

Vines may be just the right plants for a tough spot. Hides a less than regal fence, takes up very little ground space for a lot of foliage and flowers

Consider the NATIVE clematis, *Clematis ligusticifolia*, like a twinkling light show, tolerates deep shade



BUT WAIT - AFTER FLOWER IS POLLINATED, IT HAS A SECOND SHOW!

Flowers transform to delightful puffballs on their way to seed formation

Nice to be beautiful and interesting after pollination. I never deadhead, since only half the job is done. Seed formation follows pollination.



Clematis ligusticifolia, Copyright © 2015 Vernon Smith

BEYOND PLANTS

Shady habitats bristle with lichens and mushrooms in the rainy season.

Enjoying everything in your surroundings is part of gardening magic



LET'S FIX THIS

Plants can grow nearly everywhere, but give them a break!

Right Plant, Right Place

Don't fight the site, research until you find a plant that thrives in that problem corner of the garden

Or just ask us!



REFERENCES & RESOURCES & JUST INTERESTING READS

Sloat Garden Centers <https://sloatgardens.com/>

The Hidden Life of Trees, Peter Wohlleben

Calscape <https://calscape.org/>

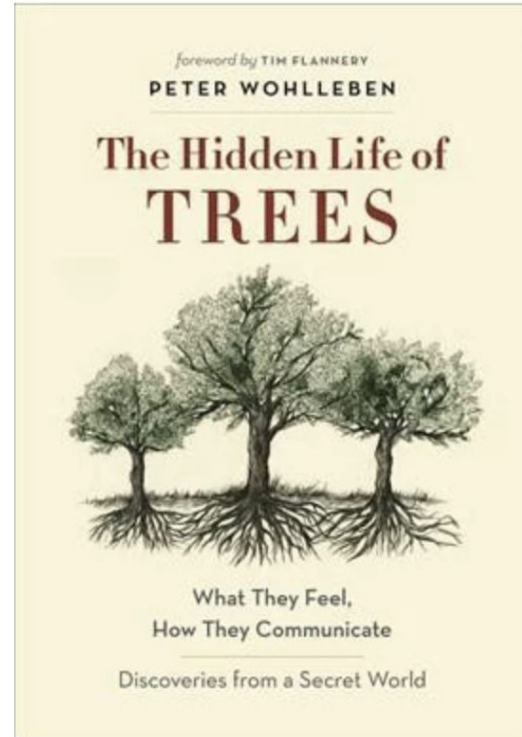
California Native Plant Society

<https://www.cnps.org/>

Doug Tallamy books or talks: *Nature's Best Hope: A New Approach to Conservation that starts in your yard*,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CBWhaTbe_x0

<https://thesouloftheearth.com/the-survivors-consolation-of-ferns/>



REFERENCE - DEEP DIVE

Native Treasures:
Gardening with the
Plants of California
by M. Nevin Smith

Review: *Native Treasures* combines Smith's personal thoughts, sometimes maverick opinions, and matchless expertise with practical advice on selected groups of native plants and their culture.

