Native plants go to work
Niche jobs for your garden

Joan Pont, Still hung up on Native Plants
Saturday October 24, 2026

Why natives?

They can stand on their own two feet, freeing you up for other areas of your garden

They evolved here over 45 million years when plants and their “nibblers” worked it out

Read More About It

In the California Floristic Province, there are 5500+ species of plants, 40% endemic, as in found no where else

Many are not in the nursery trade yet, but still there are plenty of choices



UC Santa Cruz Campus News 1/9/2013
https://news.ucsc.edu/2013/01/california-flora/

When it clicked for me

1983 move to Marin

Neighbors bemoaning their dead lawns from the multiyear drought in the 70’s with water restrictions



By Yehoshua Halevi

Chaparral Plant Community

Hiked southern face of Mt Tam: no irrigation, steep, thin dusting of topsoil, and still COVERED with living plants after the drought

Chaparral is a jigsaw of shrubs, here were Arctostaphylos and Chemise providing enhanced water penetration and retention, erosion control, and ability to get through a summer dry season with no one watering

But we have to water new plants for a summer or two

How do they do it on their own?

Good years: seed matures in October, gets extensive root system during rainy season to get through the first summer

Oak seedling may only have three leaves its first year, but roots several feet down, infrastructure

Lateral irrigation: mature trees and shrubs share!

Fog precipitation: leaves collect droplets that fall at the drip line

And One More Trick

Many plants develop a million seeds

Only one needs to survive to maturity to replace the parent plant

All the rest are not wasted

Food for birds, insects, us



Oak seedling, Joan Pont

Why California Gardening is Special

Summer Dry CLimate: seen on the west coast of all the continents, but with individual nuances

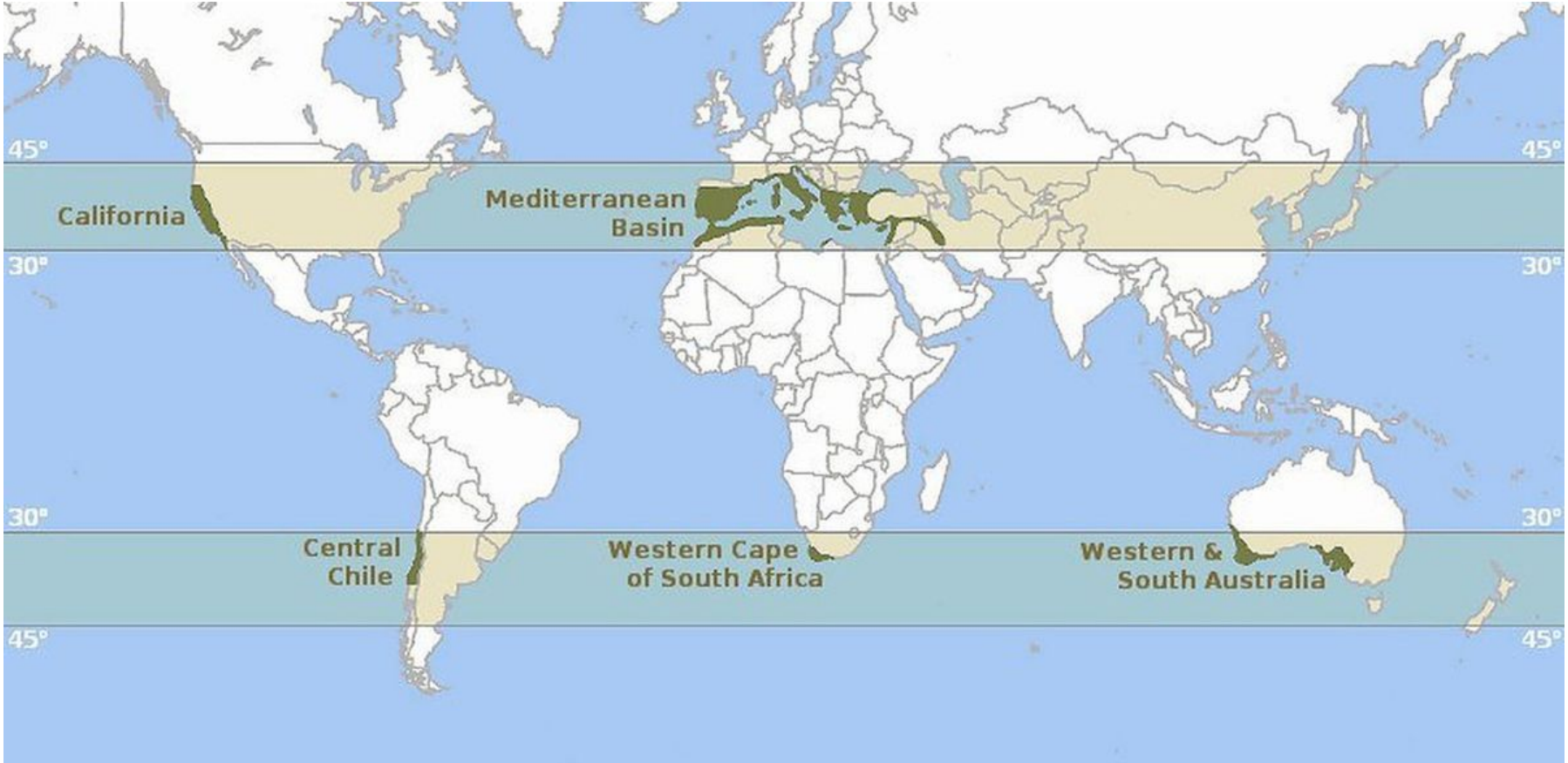
Plant Communities: Naturally found combinations that have learned to live side by side

Beyond just the Plants: Flora provides food and shelter for all the local native animals (birds and insects) so you are supporting biodiversity

Summer Dry Climate found in 5 regions in the world

- **Mediterranean Basin:** Southern Europe and surrounding the Mediterranean Sea.
- **California & Baja California:** The coastal and interior valley regions of the western United States and northwest Mexico.
- **Central Chile:** The coastal and central valley areas between the Andes and the Pacific Ocean.
- **South Africa:** The southwestern tip (Cape Region) of South Africa.
- **Australia:** The southwestern and southern coastal areas of Australia

2% of the world's Land Surface



Although tempting to choose plants from all these regions

There are tradeoffs

Limit food for birds by reducing their insect diet

Herbaceous insects are your army of little tiny gardeners nibbling away extra plant material and converting it to high calorie density yummy nuggets for birds to feed their offspring – all with no trips to the green can

***Nature's Best Hope* by Doug Tallamy**

Insects are picky eaters - Locally co-evolved over million of years



Close your eyes - for a moment

Imagine one area in your garden that bugs you

Washing dishes at your kitchen sink and gazing at - your neighbors rusting RV

Taking out the trash to a nondescript side yard

Simply wishing the weeds away instead of actually removing them

Now take paper and Pen/Pencil

Jot down ideas from this talk

Apply just one idea as an actual action item

Cross off fixing that one boring spot in your garden

Repeat!

Epilobium canum, Joan Pont



Pick the Right Plant - and how you can tell

Adapted to site: Sun/shade/dry/moist

Looks healthy & growing

Propagates on its own!

Correct ultimate size

And you like it



Starter Grid

	SUN (6+ hours direct sun daily)	SHADE (dappled to deep shade)
DRY (once a month watering once established)	Poppies Toyon	Heuchera
MOIST (at least weekly watering)	Western Spice Bush	Western Raspberry

Plants have Jobs

Screens - hide something ugly

Flip side - lead the eye to something beautiful - even in a neighbor's garden. "Borrowed landscape"

Narrow area - options for a skinny side yard

Ground cover - reduce weeds

Traffic tolerant/lawn substitute - we all cut corners, but these plants can take it

Somethings to fall in love with - that supercharged plant that gets you out in the garden

Screens - use large shrubs

No botanical difference between trees and shrubs

Trees are not great screens - lollipop trunk doesn’t hide much. Their strength is shade, majesty, keystone species

Shrubs have multiple trunks and leaves down to the ground

More like giant gumdrops

3 sun loving Shrubs with benefits - flowers and berries

Mountain Mahogony, *Cercocarpus betuloides*

Toyon, *Heteromeles arbutifolia*

Coast Silktassel, *Garrya elliptica*

Mountain mahogany, *Cercocarpus betuloides*

Yes, there are cute flowers.

Once pollinated, seeds form.

Superpower: seeds are attached to silvery feathery appendages so they can float off and grow away from parent plant



Copyright © 2012 Gary McDonald

Toyon, heteromeles arbutifolia

If happy with your site, can grow to 10 feet in 3 years

Goodbye, rusting RV

Superpower: Famous for its berries that birds love, like Mockingbirds, American Robins and Cedar Waxwings among others



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Coast silktassel, garrya elliptica

Evergreen shrub/small tree

Tough as nails, I first encountered in at Pt Reyes in a windy canyon

Superpower: Feburary display of cascading flowers, these are the male flowers whose job is to produce pollen for seed production



© 2008 Sen A. O'Hara

That skinny side yard

Vines can cover fences that are too expensive to replace

Some have unique and delightful characteristics



Flowers like old fashioned pipes, Dutchman’s pipevine, Calscape

3 Native Vines for that side yard that won't kill your trees

Dutchman's Pipevine, *Aristolochia californica*

Locally native grape, *Vitis californica*

Clematis, *Clematis lasiantha*

Dutchman's Pipevine, *Aristolochia californica*

Beautiful deciduous vine with fuzzy heart shaped leaves and curly flowers in February

Superpower: obligatory caterpillar food for the Pipevine Swallowtail Butterfly



Credit: Noah Whiteman

Our own grape? *Vitus californica*

Robust fall color

Grapes birds love, and edible too

This single plant covers 30 feet of fence

Superpower: Proper pruning yields canes for the DYI crafters



Uses of canes

Have a wreath party





Make a compost bin

Chaparral Clematis, *Clematis Lasiantha*

Six months of flowers

15 feet of coverage

Deer resistant

Very low water requirement, monthly watering



© 2009 Barry Breckling

After flowering

The seeds heads are even cuter!



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Ground Covers

Plants that grow out more than up

Very effective at suppressing weeds

Various heights, from under a foot to 3 feet in height, depending on design goals

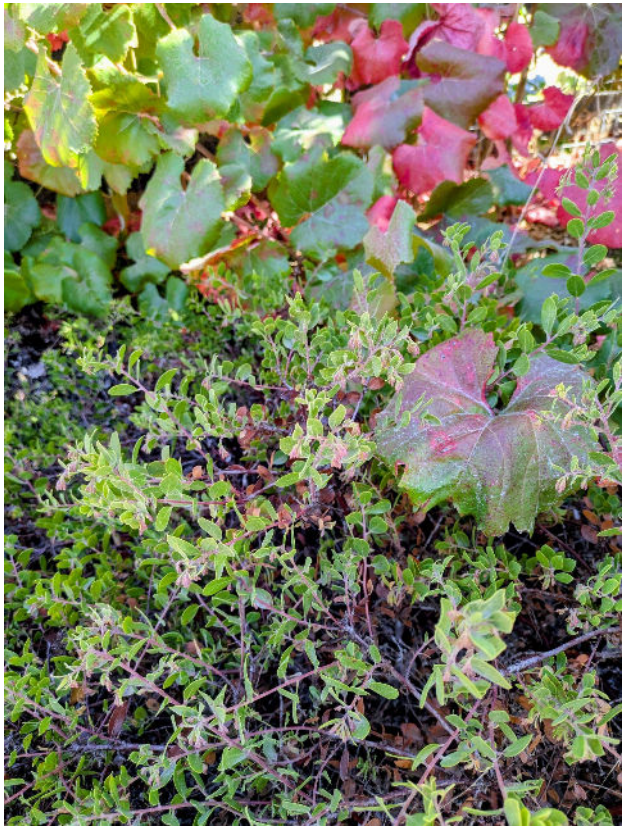


Arctostaphylos, photo: Joan Pont

Learn these two words: Arctostaphylos & Ceanothus

These two genuses have many species in various sizes

Arctostaphylos, like Manzanita, have burgundy branches, evergreen leaves, and pink bell-shaped flowers in spring



Ceanothus, California Lilac

Amazing flower display in early spring, light to dark blues

Shiney evergreen leaves

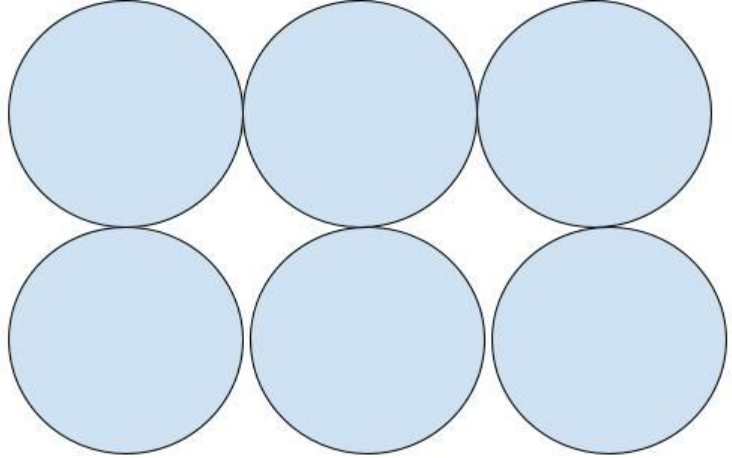
Total ground coverage, only weeds here are behind the ceanothus

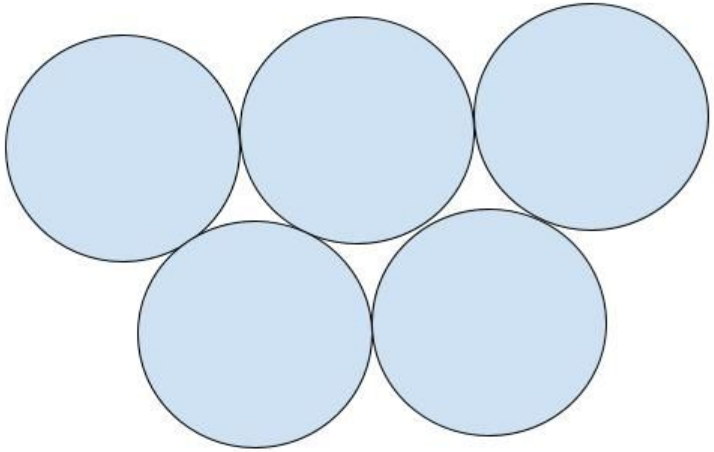


Stagger the planting, no tic-tac-toe

Circular growth pattern

Stagger to eliminate bare sightlines and improve coverage





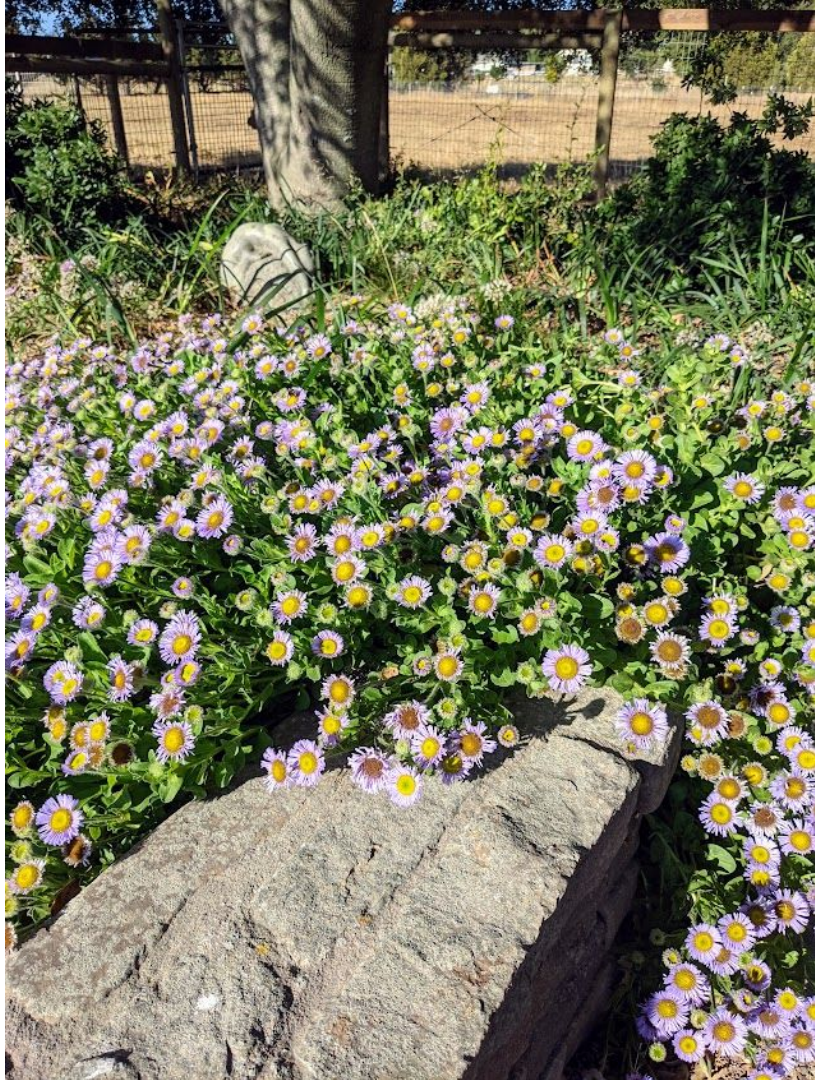
By the Sea Side

Seaside daisy

Erigeron glaucus

Very low water requirement and yet provides non-stop summer flowering

Perennial herb



Traffic Tolerant/Lawn Substitute

One inch tall and meandering *Phyla nodiflora* can fill spaces between stepping stones or cover a larger area as a law substitute

Cute flower clusters if you happen to be crouching close enough to see them



© 2012 Aaron Arthur

Beach Strawberry, Fragaria chiloensis

Strawberries that you walk on?

Yes, but don't trip on the long stolons sending out new plants

Rare berries but fabulous at filling in patches of bare earth between plants



Excellen weed suppression as well, photo: Joan Pont

Some things to fall in love with

Fragrant Pitcher Sage

Lepechinia fragrans

Gently crushed leaves smell like minted grapefruit peel

Large (for a sage) lavender flowers



Matilija Poppy, Romneya Coulteri

"Fried egg flower",
larger than your hand

Sprays of straight
branches with
blue-green foliage,
striking even without
the flowers. But who
would want that?



Photo: Joan Pont

Douglas Iris, Iris douglasiana

Plant a few around the dripline of an oak

Let them spread where they want to

Then start painting pictures of them and become famous



Pretty in Pink

Pink-Flowering Currant

Ribes Sanguineum var. Glutinosum

Deciduous shrub, likes shade, berries birds don’t seem to love but will eat

But the flower display will stop you in your tracks



A single seed packet

California Poppy

Eschscholzia californica

Yellow-fringed petals more common on the coast, termed subspecies *maritima*

Likes gravelly areas in the garden



REFERENCES

https://news.ucsc.edu/2013/01/california-flora/

Nature's Best Hope **by Doug Tallamy**

calscape.org

Note: photos not otherwise credited are those of Joan Pont in her garden


Happy gardening, photo: Joan Pont