

Native Plant Sale Heralds Fall Planting Season

By Mary Anderson

Fall is the best time of year to plant natives and perennials. John Muir correctly observed that California, except in the mountains, has only two seasons – spring and summer. For our native plants, our autumn is really their spring.

With the shortening of days, cooling of nights and return of moisture to the air with the first fall rains, the growing season begins. With the rains, or assistance from the garden hose, native plants awaken from their summer dormancy, where survival depended on their ability to shut down, conserve energy and moisture, and hang on. Even though days are cooling, the soil is a massive reservoir of heat, and as soon as a plant's roots have moisture, they begin to grow.

We can see this renewal of growth with the first warm days at the end of January and February's 'false spring.' Ceanothus stretch their branch tips, foothill wild currents (*Ribes*) already start blooming and manzanitas shine with tender, bronzy new growth, early buds and bloom. Even though March tries to spit and squawk out a bit of winter at us, the natives are undeterred. They grow on, preparing for an extravagant April and May bloom.

By the time June comes, with its long days and introduction to summer's daunting heat, most native plants at this elevation are well on their way to doing what is the aim, goal and ultimate purpose of all flowering plants—to ensure their species survival through seed. Remember, the flower is just the bribe, the come-on to the pollinator. With seed successfully set, the annual dies and the perennial or shrub rests.

It is interesting to observe how native plants prepare for that period of summer dormancy. Some shed a portion of their leaves—both because there is less work that needs to be done once active growth, flowering and seed set is accomplished, and to conserve moisture. Remaining leaves exhibit defensive strategies by toughening up, whitening to reflect sunlight and concentrating their resins and oils to protect themselves from browsing. This is also how native and Mediterranean plants survive decimation by deer and their like. We need to recognize this and allow our own gardens to slow down and toughen up for summer, and quit providing succulent new growth that attracts critters.

October is, for all the good reasons mentioned, the time of our local California Native Plant Society's fall plant sale. It will be held on Saturday, October 22nd from 9 am to 12 noon at Rocca Park in Jamestown.

Although not much will be blooming (for the reasons discussed above), loads of lovely shrubs, trees and perennials will be available for sale. A great variety of California wild lilacs (*Ceanothus*) will be offered, from the 'Julie Phelps' to the tough - spreading groundcover 'Anchor Bay'. Deer-proof manzanitas, spice bush (*Calycanthus*), and deer-resistant *Salvia clevelandii*. Trees like the showy western redbud will also be available.

A good selection of perennials will be available: penstemons, sulfur buckwheats and the exceptional Salvia 'Bee's Bliss' (which forms a dense mat with a four-foot spread) and lavender blooms. Expect some color from the Hummingbird fuchsia (*Zauschneria*) and hummingbird sage.

Fall is the only time to successfully plant touchy natives like the Matilija poppy (*Romneya coulteri*), and Fremontodendron, which succumb to root rot if watered in the heat of the summer. By planting them in the fall they will be adequately established by next season.

See you at the Native Plant Sale and in the garden.

Mary Anderson is a member and past president of the California Native Plant Society. This article was updated and revised by Francie McGowan a University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener of Tuolumne County.