



Getting Started with Native Plants

Theodore Payne Foundation for Wild Flowers and Native Plants

10459 Tuxford Street, Sun Valley, CA 91352 | (818) 768-1802 | theodorepayne.org

This guide provides a helpful step-by-step approach to turning your yard into a California native garden.

STEP 1: Get Started!

- The two first things to know about California native plants are:
 - 1) The ideal time to plant them is fall and winter when cool temperatures and rains help plants get established in their new setting.
 - 2) They need **deep** and **infrequent** watering that encourages their roots to grow deep into the soil.
- An excellent introduction to gardening with native plants is *California Native Plants for the Garden* by Carol Bornstein, David Fross and Bart O'Brien.
- Learn about native plants by spending time in the TPF nursery and bookstore, reading about the plants, and asking questions of our staff and volunteers.
- Look at other gardens to decide what styles and which types of plants appeal to you.
- Attend the TPF Native Plant Garden Tour (held every spring).
- Take a class at TPF (Recommended: California Native Plant Horticulture). Sign up for classes online at theodorepayne.org!

STEP 2: Analyze and measure your space

- Soil type and drainage: Growing plants compatible with your soil will help your garden succeed.
 - A simple test will tell you what type of soil you have: take a golf ball-size lump of soil and wet it. If it becomes sticky and can be molded into a dense ball, you have clay. If it is gritty and doesn't hold together, you have sand. If it forms a soft ball that is neither coarse nor sticky, you have loam.
 - To find out what kind of drainage you have, dig a one-foot deep and one-foot wide hole where your garden is going to be planted. Fill the hole with water and time how long it takes to drain. If it drains within 15 minutes, you have fast-draining soil. If it takes more than an hour, you have slow-draining soil. If the hole drains somewhere in between those times, you have medium draining soil.
- Site: Make a base drawing of your site.
 - Size: The size of your garden determines which plants you can grow. Measure your site and draw a to-scale outline of your yard, including house, driveway, walkways and other hardscape features. A long tape measure and graph paper are very handy for this step.
 - Features: Make note of challenging features that require special attention, such as steep slopes and views (good and bad). Note the location of north, south, east and west.
- Sunlight: Make notes on your plan of where you get sun or shade in the morning or afternoon, and where you get more than 6 hours of sun each day (full sun).

(over)

STEP 3: Design your native garden

- Understand your objectives, e.g. to provide shade, privacy, habitat, etc.
- Start with plants that are easy to grow (see our Easy Natives handout).
- Keep it simple. Start with a limited plant palette, and plant in multiples of 3 or more.
- Use evergreen shrubs such as toyon, manzanitas and California lilacs as “anchors” to maintain your garden’s appearance year round.
- Group plants according to their sun and water needs (like with like).
- Place large plants in the background, medium-size plants in the middle, and low plants in the front and along walkways.
- When drawing each plant on your site plan, use a to-scale circle of the plant’s width at maturity. Give each plant enough space to reach its mature size; this prevents the need for pruning in years to come.

STEP 4: Prepare your site

- Remove or reduce your lawn, using the method that works best for you. Allow enough time necessary for *complete* removal of turf (this can take up to 2 months). (If you are removing Bermudagrass, expect some regrowth in subsequent years; remove sprouts as they emerge.)
- Remove all weeds. Avoid tilling your soil unless it is extremely compacted. Tilling brings old weed seeds to the surface, creating more weeds later.
- Install or upgrade your irrigation system, if necessary. Choose the system or method – either drip, overhead or hand-watering – that will work best for your site and your needs.
- Install hardscape, if planned.

STEP 5: Install your native garden

- If the ground is dry, water the site two or three days prior to planting to make digging much easier.
- Space plants according to your plan, giving each plant enough space to reach its mature size.
- Dig the planting hole one time as deep and twice as wide as the root ball of the plant (for more detailed info, see our Planting Guide).
- Place the plant in the hole, making sure that the crown of the plant is slightly above the grade of the surrounding soil.
- Back fill with your native soil. There is no need to add amendments or fertilizers. Pack gently but firmly.
- After all of your plants are installed, water the entire area thoroughly. If hand watering, make sure each plant receives at least 4-5 gallons of water within the first 2 hours after planting.
- Mulch. Cover your soil with a 2-3 inch layer of organic mulch (bark, leaves, wood fibers). Keep mulch about 6 inches away from the base of each plant.

STEP 6: Enjoy!