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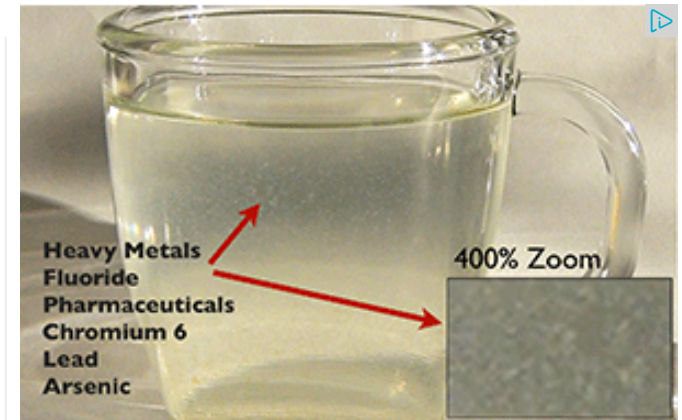
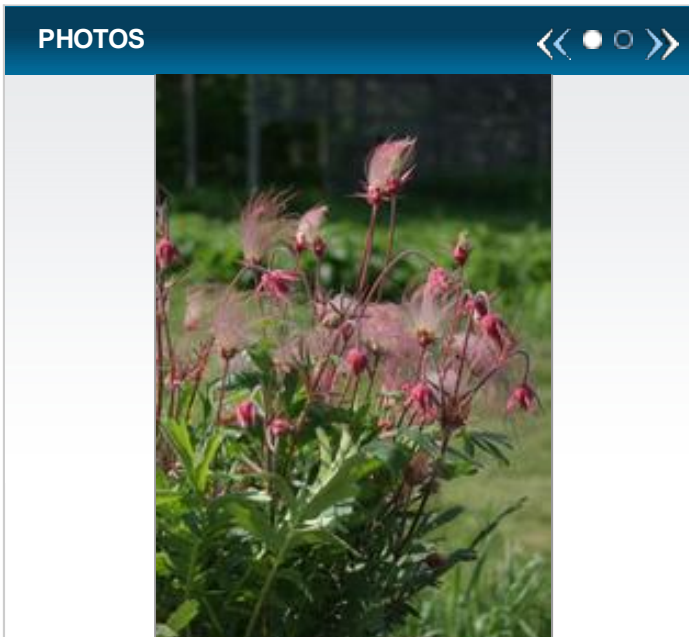
Seeds: Going native with an eye on water

By [Debbie Arrington](#)
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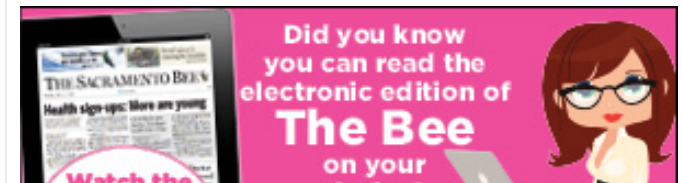
Published: Saturday, May. 17, 2014 - 12:00 am

As we continue to reshape our front- and backyards to fit our non-rainy weather, we in California have learned that some plants cope much better with less water than others. Often, it's because those plants were made to live here.

California natives have a natural advantage over



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other plants. Through evolution, they learned to thrive with dry, hot summers and less than ideal soil – at least those that grew up in the [Central Valley](#).

That makes these natives a natural for low-water gardens. They're used to no rain and, once established, can get by on a trickle.

This native approach also fits a basic garden maxim for success: Choose the right plant for the right place. If you opt for natives in the Central Valley, that's a big step in that direction.

Ellen Zagory, horticulture director for the UC Davis Arboretum, has experimented with many native plants to find the best fits for the Sacramento area.

The best of the best are part of the arboretum's New Front Yard series. Today, the arboretum's teaching nursery hosts its end-of-season clearance sale with many of these plants offered at discount prices.

"Everybody is asking about it," Zagory said of the New Front Yard series. "People want information on how to take out their lawns and what to plant (in their place). There's been a lot of interest."

One lesson she's learned the hard way: If you water these natives, they will grow – and grow.



Miriam Goldberger

Prairie smoke (*Geum triflorum*) is an interesting native wildflower that can make itself at home in the dry garden, according to author Miriam Goldberger.

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ARBORETUM PLANT SALE

Where: Arboretum Teaching Nursery, Garrod Drive, UC Davis campus

When: 9 a.m.-1 p.m. today

Admission: Free

Details: arboretum.ucdavis.edu, (530) 752-4880

This end-of-season clearance sale features hundreds of water-wise favorites including several Arboretum All-Stars and selections from the arboretum's New Front Yard series.

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“Definitely, do not plant them where you are irrigating (two or three times a week),” Zagory said. “They will take off. An example is California fuchsia. Give it just enough water so it doesn’t turn brown. Otherwise, it can take over.”

Likewise with native asters such as the California dwarf aster *Aster chilensis* (“Point Saint George”).

“Actually, we use it (at the arboretum) as a bank stabilizer,” Zagory said. “If you water it, it will be 8 feet across before you know it. But it’s a beautiful plant and does quite well with very little water.”

Besides low-water benefits, native plants attract native beneficial insects. Bees and butterflies love this food source.

“A lot of people are asking for white sage, *Salvia apiana*,” Zagory said. “On the California Native Plant Society’s guided tour, I saw the most beautiful specimens, and they got no water at all. They were just covered with flowers – and carpenter bees.”

Zagory’s current favorite: *Solidago* “Cascade Creek.” This California goldenrod cultivar offers copious yellow flowers throughout the summer.

“It could probably survive without any summer water and still keep going,” she said. “It attracts lots of beneficial insects. It’s blooming like crazy with water every other week.”

Author Miriam Goldberger is another fan of using native plants in the home garden. Her current book is “Taming Wildflowers: Bringing the Beauty and Splendor of Nature’s Blooms into Your Own Backyard” (St. Lynn’s Press, \$18.95, 208 pages).

While California poppies have become ubiquitous in local landscapes, other wildflowers could make themselves at home in suburban yards, Goldberger said.



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Among her candidates of under-used California native plants: dotted mint, Helen’s Flower (a member of the aster family), harebell, prairie smoke and evening primrose. But water sparingly and keep them within their bounds.

Wildflowers make sense for home gardeners if they choose the right natives for their location, Goldberger said.

“Wildflowers have adapted to the surrounding environment over millions of years,” she said. “They know what they’re dealing with: the hard clays, the nutrient-deficient sands, the droughts. Because of this co-evolution, there is a wildflower for most any backyard that can be grown without the use of large quantities of water, nutrients or soil amendments.

“Reducing these three inputs save you time and money,” Goldberger added, “but more importantly, you are saving water for more important uses, keeping excess nutrients out of the streams – very important for avoiding toxic algal blooms – and leaving you to use your compost amendments for your vegetables.”

Wildflowers also serve another important service to the home gardener: They attract pollinators, noted Goldberger. If you’re trying to grow fruit and vegetables, you need those bees and other pollinators. Wildflowers will bring them into your garden and help create better crops.

If you’re thinking about going native, this is a good time to see what’s blooming, and where. Some natives prefer full sun, others thrive in light shade. The UC Davis Arboretum has literally hundreds of choices in bloom now.

“One word of caution: If you’re going to take out your lawn, wait until fall,” Zagory said. “If you do it now, you’ll have bare dirt through summer. Establishing new plants will take almost as much water as the lawn. Take this time to plan and get ready.”

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