Tending Your Native Garden Through The Years

a talk previously known as Maintaining Your Native Garden Year by Year

CA poppy - coastal form perennial.
Gardens are alive and may not stay as we direct – unlike our home interiors

Even our native plant gurus sometimes disagree with each other – so can we all

Rarely there’s ‘Eureka!’ – more often there’s ‘Hmm.. that’s interesting.’

Everything I share here is based on my observations, experiences, and studies – please adapt according to your own such things

A garden is never done – don’t worry, be happy

Our unavoidable four major sufferings: Birth, Aging, Sickness, Death

Applies to gardens too

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WE’VE STUDIED AND PRACTICED A BIT OF NATIVE GARDENING
- IN EACH OF OUR OWN UNIQUE CORNERS OF THIS CALIFORNIA FLORISTIC PROVENCE

✓ Rhythm of the CA seasons

  ✓ Habitat relationships

✓ Sustainable practices

  ✓ Right plant, right place

✓ Garbage in, garbage out
We may have already practiced Integrated Garden Tending (IGT) based on our tolerance threshold.

High tolerance for a less tending look

Low tolerance for a less tending look

Medium tolerance for a less tending look

Integrated Pest and Weed Management enable the healthiest gardens.

NO MAINTENANCE = A WILDLANDS LOOK

NO WATER = STRESSED OR DEAD PLANTS
TENDING OUR CA NATIVE PLANT GARDENS will always include consideration of (5) points

- climate and weather
- soil
- plants
- irrigation
- personal taste
NOW LET'S DO THINGS FOR THE LONG HAUL

CA Native Gardens from:

- 1 - 3 growing seasons
- 4 - 8 growing seasons
- >9 growing seasons

Arctostaphylos (Manzanita) sp.
Santa Barbara Botanic Garden
focused on the flora of CA since 1936
photo by taken 11/2004
1 – 3 growing seasons: Climate and Weather
ambient sun, shade, wind, temperature, moisture/dryness, microclimates

Trees: choose space wisely

Understory (beneath main canopy): plant for current AND future conditions

Shrubs: pinch or prune after blooming as needed to encourage best shape

Weather creates short term effects
Climate creates long term effects
4 – 8 growing seasons: Climate and Weather
ambient sun, shade, wind, temperature, moisture/dryness, microclimates

**Trees:** adjust plantings if conditions have changed... or not

**Understory (beneath main canopy):** replace plants that have done poorly or that you never quite liked

**Shrubs:** add new plants to fill gaps or remove any that have become bullies
>9 growing seasons: Climate and Weather
ambient sun, shade, wind, temperature, moisture/dryness, microclimates

**Trees**: be vigilant to mitigate stress caused by any and all factors.

*Walk in the wilds to see how natives develop in nature then adapt to your garden setting. CNPS hikes are great for this.*

**Understory (beneath main canopy)**: shape or thin out as needed to allow for best air circulation.

**Healthy, established gardens enable healthy, vibrant habitat for all creatures great and small.**

**Shrubs**: continue to prune for shape and rejuvenation as tolerated by plant.
1 – 3 growing season: Climate and Weather
ambient sun, shade, wind, temperature, moisture/dryness, microclimates

Perennials: if happy where they are planted then these shorter lived plants will be exuberant in season

Annuals: live for just one year, most want sun, and re-seed easily if happy

Gilia tricolor: seedlings from last Jan-May bloom

Succulents & Potted Plants: can be started small, even grown in doors, then planted out into a planting bed or rock garden
4 – 8 growing seasons: Climate and Weather
ambient sun, shade, wind, temperature, moisture/dryness, microclimates

*Perennials:* these are important years for most since you’ve watched them get established and now want to see them last even longer.

*Succulents:* move or pot up if conditions are more favorable elsewhere in your garden.

*Annuals:* if your spot has worked well with them then sow new and varied seeds.

*Perennials:* these are important years for most since you’ve watched them get established and now want to see them last even longer.
9 growing seasons: Climate and Weather
ambient sun, shade, wind, temperature, moisture/dryness, microclimates

Grasses: most have sunk their roots deeply by now and can survive even strong fluctuations in the weather.

Perennials: the drought and poor tending may not kill the tough ones but they certainly disguise their natural beauty.

Succulents: if temperatures have grown warmer through the years then they most likely have died or need to be moved as soon as possible.
1 – 3 growing seasons: Soil for healthy root and shoot development

Understory (beneath main canopy) and Shrubs: several old pine trees had died here while two remained creating an acidic layer of decomposing needles. Healthy top soil was brought in mix with or mound on top of the surface while plant selection favored some with greater acid tolerance.

Trees: this ‘St. Helena Manzanita was planted from a 15 gallon container into added healthy soil that was mounded on top of the existing construction -compacted clay soil to give the new tree roots a chance to grow into the new soil while the old was improved by resulting microbial activity.

Watch this space
4 – 8 growing seasons: Soil healthy root establishment

Trees: here is the same ‘St. Helena Manzanita during forth growing season. The irrigation continues to be drip and mulch is replenished in late spring and fall and always kept 6” – 12” away from root crown.

Improving soil: adding organic matter of a matched type to your plants and their needs can help revive natural processes that occur to keep your soil alive and healthy but is not always necessary.

Understory and Shrubs: a Ceanothus ‘Concha’ and other shrubs have started establishing themselves well in the mounded, improved soil.
>9 growing seasons: Soil established roots, branches, and foliage

**Trees:** The St. Helena Manzanita was sited for screening from neighbors as seen from a bedroom window. Now at its full size, the purpose is accomplished. Natural leaf drop is allowed to accumulate and now act as the only mulch used within the canopy area.

**Understory and Shrubs:** the Ceanothus ‘Concha’ and other shrubs and perennials are now established while seasonal wildflowers complete the scene. Natural leaf drop is left around the plants to provide mulch while new pine needle fall is redirected under the canopy of the pines.
1 - 3 growing seasons: Soil root development

**Succulents:** the importance of planting native succulents in well-drained soil is paramount and a planting bed behind a dry stacked rock wall is a great, easily drained location.

**Bulbs and Potted Plants:** native bulbs are fun to grow in pots where you can control the soil and water. Since bulbs will make new bulblets, they can easily be harvested and repotted separately.

**Perennials and Ground Cover:** an old lawn was sheet mulched and planted up with native strawberries which are strong enough to withstand the roots of existing Chinese Pistache trees and full coverage was achieved in two years. A dry creek bed helped mitigate the rest of the old clay soil.

**Calochortus monophyllus**
4 – 8 growing seasons: Soil root establishment

Annuals: when re-seeding make sure the seeds make good contact with soil by tamping and watering lightly. Apply any mulch lightly so not to block new sprouts

Perennials and Succulents: more established plantings in full sun can shade their own roots but monitor for desiccation in plants and soil then mulch with organic or inorganic matter as appropriate

Watch out for long necks
Growing seasons: Soil root, branch, and foliage establishment

Perennials: a parent plant may die but not before reseeding itself in a more favored location. Let it be if you can since it chose its own favored location.

After working in the garden or visiting nurseries and before hiking in wildlands make it a habit to sanitize your shoes by spraying rubbing alcohol on the soles and sides.

Potted Plants: some plants can live a long time in a pot but at some point it’s best to remove it, reduce the root build up, and replant in partially old and partially refreshed planting mix.

Ferns: while periodically removing unwanted, unsightly spent fronds, some ferns can be divided and replanted to increase your stock or share with friends.
1 - 3 growing seasons: Plants

1st sleep, 2nd creep, 3rd leap

Trees: take the longest to become established. Protecting them as needed while they grow can sometimes be necessary.

Shrubs: can grow quickly, medium fast, or relatively fast. Believe what you read regarding ultimate size and space accordingly or be ready to do a lot of pruning.

Understory: You can see it now but there is a Silk Tassel Tree waiting to grow against the bedroom wall.

Take photos throughout the seasons and years to ‘wow’ yourself and friends later.

Wait for it.
Shrubs: a plant is often considered ‘established’ if it has grown 3 times larger than its original size and/or the roots feel well attached when pulled firmly but gently.

Understory: a Silk Tassel tree may not have catkins in the first several years and only the male plants are as showy as these. Toyons of course are beautiful as they fill in.

Read up on your plants to learn their needs and preferred tending procedures then don’t be afraid to make mistakes.
>9 growing seasons: Plants invested inhabitants

Shrubs: fully established and maturing these shrubs and vine provide screening to the house from the busy street as well as year-round interest as planned and all by the original plantings.

Understory: the Silk Tassel has grown, filling the space and blooming regularly as planned.
1 – 3 growing seasons: Plants

sleep, creep, leap

Perennials, succulents, and annuals: everything still looks new, fresh, sometimes with the gangliness of youth, less resistant to pests, and sometimes forgetting to fully bloom. Light or strategic trimming can help certain plants fill in and bush up.

Healthy plants resist pests and pathogens best.
4 – 8 growing seasons: Plants invested inhabitants

Perennials, grasses, succulents, potted plants: In full form and character, the garden can be put on periodic cruise control, especially in summer.

Most herbaceous perennials can be cut back hard to refresh while other types can be divided and replanted. Removing spent blooms can help make an extended or second bloom time.

Sequential trimming can tidy things up while leaving some blooms or seed heads for wildlife.
>9 growing seasons: Plants invested inhabitants

Perennials, wildflowers, fruit, grasses: some things have matured beautifully, fruiting plants have become viable, some plants have taken over whether invited or not, or maybe, again, you’d like to refresh the look of some sections.

Whether from drought or poor tending or life’s been too busy to notice, major rework of the garden may be wanted or needed at this stage. A tending in time saves nine.
1 - 3 growing seasons: Irrigation 
help your plants become established

Trees, understory, shrubs: 
depending upon the plant, 
consider irrigating to medium 
gauge then waning in the first 
year while knowing you’ll be 
transitioning nursery grown 
plants that have been watered 
daily to thriving on less frequent 
and lower quantity.

Know your soil and how it might change 
. Choose your preferred watering 
method(s) . Monitor, adjust and change 
as needed throughout the seasons

Water Wise Santa Clara County

How water moves through soil

Saving water is not 
just for droughts 
any more

Julie Montanari Design
4 – 8 growing seasons: Irrigation
aka ‘irritation’, keep your plants a live

Monitor for efficiency, double check for leaks and breaks, look beneath the mulch, flush before turning off or on for the seasons, a fix in time saves gallons and $, deep water individual plants by hand if needed, learn from nature and adjust as needed, add your wisdom here _______________.

Trees, understory, shrubs: ‘grow’ your emitter spacing with the growth of your plants. Water the canopy not the trunk.

There is not much ‘green’ about the irrigation industry

ewingirrigation.com
> 9 growing seasons: Irrigation
to do or not to do

Windy Hill in September

No supplemental water in your landscape can work depending upon your tolerance threshold

Trees, understory, shrubs: too much water at any stage makes plants grow too fast and is not a sustainable practice for both the plant as well as our water budgets. Calibrate your regime year by year for optimum balance of growth, bloom, and efficiency.
1 – 3 growing seasons: Irrigation help your plant become established

If irrigation is too generous during plant establishment it can result in wasted water and the extra work and green waste to cut things back.

Green roof soil is shallow and more easily dries out until plant roots are more established.

Perennials, succulents, annuals: water to enable plants to fill in and out and make sure to monitoring frequently to prevent problems and plant loss. Drought tolerance does not apply until roots are established.
4 – 8 growing seasons: Irrigation
aka ‘irritation’, keep your plants alive

Perennials, grasses, annuals: most native grasses want at least some of their naturally evolved period of ‘down time’ in which they keep their roots alive while ‘browning out’ on top. Irrigating too much at this time only stresses the plants more and creates extra thatch build up. No matter what the Jones’ say, let it happen. Mitigate the dry look with summer, fall, and winter blooming natives.

Some pet peeves:
(1) irrigation tubing left uncovered to heat up and deteriorate sooner
(2) plants needing emitters but have none
>9 growing seasons: Irrigation
to do or not to do

For naturally drought tolerant but smaller native plants, the choice to keep the irrigation on or rip it out is all yours to consider while weighing the benefits and pitfalls.

Perennials, grasses, ground cover, and some shrubs: established and well kept native plant gardens have form and function - structured and attractive to birds, bees, butterflies, good bugs, and humans alike. Providing supplemental water is an ongoing consideration.
1 – 3 growing seasons: Personal Taste
“never give up!” vs. “change it yet again!”

Trees: when you fall in love with this type of life form, buy it big, and plant it in any empty spot, it may be necessary to consider moving it or even removing to gift another plant nut.

Understory (sub shrubs): are so useful in gardens. After planting ‘go togethers’ it’s best to decide earlier than later if you like the combo since transplanting can cause undue stress.

Shrubs: although shrubs have typical woody stems, some re-sprout from old wood and some do not. Learn which before you prune.
4 – 8 growing seasons: Personal Taste
“never give up!” vs. “change it all!”

Trees: more tree lust inspired by walks around the neighborhood but believe it or not the spacing will work and the homeowner is saving their water to use on these new sequoias by all other plantings for drought tolerance. The customer is always right.

Shrubs: some like to create thickets. It’s best to know before you grow and take full responsibility

Understory: as some smaller trees start achieving greater heights you hopefully already have a planned max or decide to let it go. Check which seasons are best to prune various trees and shrubs

It’s great to heart your garden
Trees: their true grace and grandeur can now just begin to be grasp. Tending well from the beginning and beyond, even if you need to hire a professional arborist from time to time, is well worth it.

Understory: allowing the space and keeping healthy conditions will enable these important habitat players to provide their maximum benefit.

Shrubs: as tall, deciduous ones grow, you may need to continue pruning for shape and purpose.
1 – 3 growing seasons: Personal Taste

“never give up!” vs. “change it yet again!”

Potted Plants: you’d like a native grape but have no room? Pot it!

Perennials: moist shade or dry sun, matching conditions to your site makes this stage relatively easy.

Annuals and Bulbs: if you plant them they might bloom.
4 – 8 growing seasons: Personal Taste

“never give up!” vs. “change it all!”

**Annuals and wildflowers:** keep them coming by letting them seed themselves or continue to add new.

**Perennials:** small or large, some may last longer or disappoint more or have you replanting the same after the original has spent its natural life.

**Succulents & Potted Plants:** repot and repot and repot if needed.
> 9 growing seasons: Personal Taste
simply “never give up!”

Annuals: some move in and never leave. Embrace it or forever fight it.

Perennials and grasses: some strong will survive this long or re-seed. You can decide when and which to replant, reposition, or not.

Vines: can last a very long time and some bloom better when they do. Let them show you where they want to go although trimming and guiding also helps.
Because of your TLC, may you and your garden coexist for a very long and happy time!

Anza Borrego Desert in spring  www full credit unknown