

Guideline for Planting and Watering your California Natives

-adapted from CNPS materials for Riverside-San Bernardino Chapter of CNPS

Planting

Below are suggestions for planting a drought tolerant California native plant. When and how you plant natives can make all the difference in the plant's survival. Be sure to check on the specific plant needs or requirements as for sun/shade, water and soil type. For example, place any riparian or wetland plants in regularly irrigated or naturally moist areas you might have, and drought tolerant ones in drier areas on your property.

When to Plant – For areas below 3,000 feet in elevation, the ideal time to plant California natives is late fall through late winter. Planting in spring may be preferable at higher elevations or around water features.

How to Plant – When putting your plants in the ground:

- Moisten the area to be planted a day or two before you dig to plant. Dig a hole in the moist soil (like a wrung-out sponge) that is twice as wide and as deep as the container. If you're planting on a bank or slope, create a flat area around the hole with a shallow berm on downslope side to help retain water.
- Fill the hole with water and let it soak through completely before you plant. Also soak the plant.
- Rough up the sides and bottom of the hole so the roots will be able to dig in as they grow.
- If roots are tight in the pot (root bound), loosen the moist roots at base of rootball. Otherwise, do not rough up the roots when you take them out. Leave them as undisturbed as possible.
- For woody plants and those with a distinct above-ground stem, the base of the stem just above the roots should end up about one-half inch above the surrounding soil. This prevents rotting of a stem that is buried. Spread moist, loose soil gently into the gap around the plant and tamp it down with your hands to remove air pockets. Fill with soil and smooth out the remaining dirt. Make sure all roots are covered with soil. For the initial soaking, create a berm to outside of rootball.

Planting into a hole that's twice as wide and as deep as the container (Photos by Ernesto Alvarado).



Mulching and Finishing Touches

Although native plants don't need fertilizer, many may benefit from mulch. The two basic types are organic (bark, leaves, etc.) and inorganic (rocks, gravel etc.) spread around the plant away from the base of the stem.

- Chaparral, woodland and forest plants prefer organic mulch, preferably with some rocks as well. Plants from seashore, desert and rocky outcrops prefer inorganic mulch. You can check calscape.org for more information about which types of mulch different plants prefer.
- Do not cover the rootball of the plant with mulch. Mulch too close to the stem can result in rotting of the stem.
- Rocks placed just outside the rootball are always helpful because they provide cooling for the roots.

Watering

Watering is one of the most important factors in the health and longevity of California natives. Get to know your plants' requirements because wetland plants and drought tolerant plants have different watering needs. Place plants with similar needs together and take advantage of the places in your yard that capture more rainwater for those plants that require the most moisture. The best thing you can do is capture rainfall for use on your property. To help your plantings succeed, here are some guidelines:

After planting through the first couple years:

- *Once the plant is in the ground, build a small irrigation berm around it, and generously soak it to below the root zone.* You can't overwater California plants during this initial soaking.
- After that first watering, you may need to take down the irrigation berm so subsequent watering doesn't make the soil too soggy. The plant should not be left to get waterlogged or it will die.
- *During the first three months,* you want to keep the rootball moist (but not soggy). If it's raining, you might not have to water at all. But if there's no rainfall after planting, you'll probably need to water 1-2 times per week depending on your soil and microsite. *Avoid the heat -- water early or late in the day.*
- *After the first three months,* focus on giving less frequent but deeper watering. Make sure the rootball is only slightly moist before deep watering, this could be every 1-3 weeks if there's little to no rain. During the rainy season, you can rely mostly or entirely on rainfall.
- *After the first year,* and after it's doubled in size, the plant should be fairly established. If the plant is properly sited, you should be able to cut watering back to once per month. When you do water your plants, it's always best to water in cooler temperatures.
- Reduce watering over time between the first and second year.

Watering Established Plants

Older drought-tolerant native plants are more susceptible to root rot in warm and wet conditions. It is often best to avoid direct artificial irrigation in the hot part of the dry season. Your plants might look a little brown and drought stressed in the summer and early fall, but remember that is natural.

Most drought tolerant natives (and all riparian natives) can handle occasional irrigation in the summer and early fall. They can look a little greener and prettier with a little bit of water as follows:

- Dust off the leaves with a fine spray every month, during a cool stretch. If your plant clearly needs extra water, it's best to provide occasional watering during a cool phase.
- Think like nature. Resist the urge to water on sunny hot days, and try to simulate a light summer storm during cooler, cloudy days.
- Irrigation too close to the main stem in hot weather fosters soil pathogens that can kill established drought tolerant natives. Move drip emitters away from the original rootball as your plant's roots extend outward. If you're using overhead sprinklers, set watering times for early am.

For more on drip, overhead or hose watering, please www.cnps.org/gardening/prepping-and-planting/watering. Check the www.Calscape.org pages to see which plants tolerate summer water.

Below are examples of mulching with drip (left) and irrigation placed away from the plant stem (right).

