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California Natives—Water or Not?

by Carmen Konkle, Contra Costa Master Gardener

Going native? How do you know whether or not to water them?

SUMMARY

Some normally drought-tolerant California native plants fare better and provide a better garden look with some supplemental water in the summer. Just don't overdo it.

Due to the current drought and California's ongoing water issues, many people are beginning to think about planting California natives and other drought tolerant plants. Our last column recommended the UC Davis Arboretum All-Stars. This week, I'd like to share my experience in my garden with drought tolerant plants.

Growing a Mixture of Plants:

My own journey toward California natives began about ten years ago, when my husband and I purchased a home on a mostly weed-ridden, one-acre plot in Alamo. I have always loved to play in the dirt and because the land had no watering system to speak of, it became my challenge to reclaim the land and determine what to plant and where. So planting natives and drought tolerant plants was sort of a "no-brainer". After much research and many trials with some misses, I recognize that I am not a hard-core native plant person. I grow a mix of garden standards, drought tolerant and native plants. I have areas of my yard that get no supplemental water

at all, some that I can water by hand, and some that I have put on small drip systems run by battery-operated timers.

Mulch, Mulch, Mulch:

While my main method is to "mulch, mulch, mulch", both for weed control and water savings, this last summer I had a little surprise. In my perennial garden, one of the native California Fuchsias, *Zauschneria californica*, had deposited a new growth near the drip system, about 25 feet from the original plant. The area gets water every seven days during the hot months. Native plants seem to be pretty adept at finding unseen moisture. In the perennial garden they get little to no water during the summer. While they do bloom and multiply, they are not as showy as some might like and tend to get a little "leggy" toward the end of summer. But, with a little water once a week, there was a sudden effusion of bright red flowers. You can see the difference in the photos (next page).





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A Cautionary Tale:

So, to water or not to water? My answer is somewhat cautionary and usually is “just because it is called a native doesn't mean it never needs any water.” The answer depends on how much water you want to use and how tolerant you are of the “native” look. Left to their own devices, California natives

will thrive, but may not put on the show you want. If you decide to water, do so with caution as too much water can be detrimental as well. However, this little surprise has told me that my perennial garden may need just a little more tending and a tad more water next summer.



California Fuchsia—No Water



California Fuchsia—Weekly Water



CONTRA COSTA MASTER GARDENERS

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

75 Santa Barbara Road, Pleasant Hill, CA 94523

HELP DESK: (925) 646-6586 or mgcontracosta@ucdavis.edu ♦ WEB: ccmg.ucdavis.edu