

# PLANTS

A resilient landscape is **fire-wise**, water wise and promotes biodiversity by using California native plants. These gardens use **sustainable practices**, **plant selection**, and **maintenance** to reduce the risk of fire in the defensible space zone. Resilient gardens save water, protect us from fire and promote biodiversity.

PLANT SELECTION	WATER & IRRIGATION	NATIVE PLANTS & COMMUNITIES	INVASIVE SPECIES	IMPORTANCE OF OAK WOODLAND	P MANA
--------------------	-----------------------	--------------------------------	---------------------	-------------------------------	-----------

## Plant Selection

Plant Selection: “Right plant, right place”  
After reviewing the guidance in the Landscapes section, select plants using the following guidelines:

- Size and shape. Choose plants that will mature at the desired height and width, reducing or eliminating the need to prune to control their size.
- Site conditions will refine your plant selection. Consideration of slope, exposure, and wind will allow you to match the best plants to your unique situation. Be aware whether a plant prefers sun or shade, and its tolerance of different soil types and drainage. In choosing plants, it also helps to know the local [plant communities](#) of your watershed.
- Plant type. Consider whether the best plant for the site will be a ground cover, a shrub, an herbaceous perennial, or a tree. These different plant types will have different roles to play in the defensible space, as described in the [Landscapes](#) section.

- Native plants provide many more resources to our native pollinators and other wildlife than non-native plants, and are an important source of habitat. A mix of at least 80% native plants provides excellent habitat for wildlife biodiversity, and allows plenty of room for other favorites.
- Climate adaptation. Choose from plants that are well adapted to a summer dry climate, and that won't suffer from your area's temperature extremes in summer and winter. The goal is to choose plants that will be healthy with the least water and maintenance.
- Variety helps to create a beautiful garden and provides many resources to wildlife. Strive for a diverse planting with plants that bloom throughout the year, while utilizing some massing of three or more plants of the same species to create some continuity.

### Plants and Fire

Remember that the condition of the plant is often as important as the species. Many plants that are considered fire hazardous can be beneficially used in the garden if properly maintained and irrigated, especially natives. Depending on its [maintenance](#), growth form and access to water, the same plant may be ignition resistant in one environment and flammable in another. All water-stressed plants in poor condition are more likely to burn readily.

For this reason, and because all plants can burn, we don't recommend use of a "fire-safe plant list", as this can lead gardeners to a false sense of security. There are, however, certain plant species that create a lot of fine debris and are difficult to maintain. These plants would ideally be removed from the Defensible Space area and replaced with less problematic plant selections. Some characteristics that tend to make plants more fire hazardous include:

- gummy, resinous sap with a strong odor
- A fine, twiggy growth habit
- loose or papery bark

We recommend that plants with these characteristics are avoided or used with caution.

---

## Recommended Plants

## Groundcovers

California fuchsia

*Epilobium species and cultivars*



*California fuchsia, photo by Jon Kanagy*

The California fuchsia groundcover cultivars such as 'Wayne's Silver' and 'Schiefflan's Choice' are showy perennial groundcovers, with gray-green foliage, to about 1 ft. tall. The bright orange-red tubular flowers attract hummingbirds in the late summer to fall.

California Lilac

*Ceanothus species and cultivars*

Bearberry

*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*



*Bearberry, photo by Jon Kanagy*

Bearberry is a mat-forming evergreen groundcover growing 6-18 in. tall and 6-8 ft. wide. It prefers part shade and grows rapidly near the coast where it can take more sun. This valuable habitat plant blooms in early winter with white or pale pink urn-shaped flowers and is covered in showy red berries in the fall. Bearberry is a good choice for erosion control and for under oaks. If appropriately spaced this lovely groundcover will need no maintenance.

Coyote Brush

*Baccharis pilularis* cultivars



*Yankee Point Groundcover Ceanothus* –  
photo credit Pat Sesser

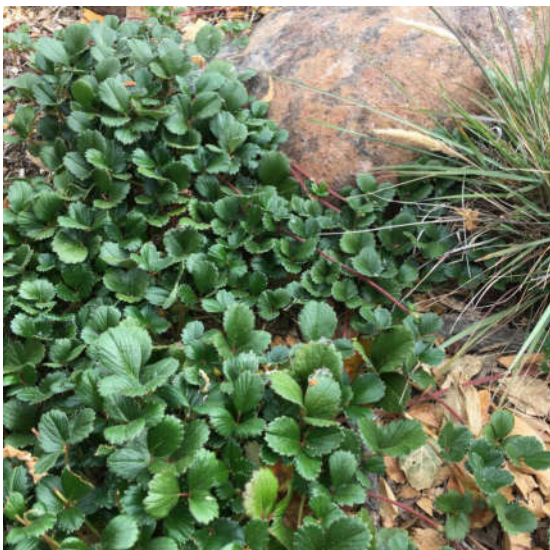
*Ceanothus* groundcover species most commonly occur along the California coast. *Ceanothus thyrsiflorus* var. *griseus* or *Ceanothus gloriosus* 'Anchor Bay' are available in nurseries. This beautiful and drought tolerant evergreen groundcover grows from 8-24 in. tall, depending on the cultivar.



*Coyote Brush Groundcover* – photo by April Owens

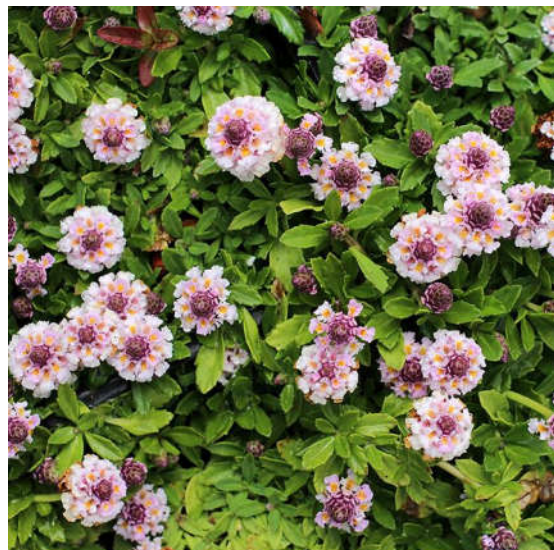
*Baccharis* cultivars 'Twin Peaks' and 'Pigeon Point' are evergreen groundcovers that can grow 12-18 in. tall to 6 ft. (or more) in width within a few years, so be sure to space appropriately. These groundcovers naturally occur along the entire California coast. They have a deep root system that provides good erosion control, and they can take a lot of pruning as needed. For fire-wise planting, pruning should be done every few years to keep plants from becoming too woody.

Wild Strawberry  
*Fragaria* species



*Beach strawberry*, photo by Jon Kanagy

Lippia  
*Phyla nodiflora*



*Lippia*, photo by April Owens

This shade loving groundcover spreads quickly to cover 3 ft. or more and is only 3 in. tall. Woodland strawberry (*Fragaria vesca*) occurs in redwood forests, and beach strawberry (*Fragaria chiloensis*) occurs in coastal plant communities. Both form dense groundcover carpets with fire-wise value, and both plants appreciate monthly irrigation in the summer.

Lippia is a spreading ground cover that is tough and walkable and able to survive a wide range of conditions and soil types. Best with occasional deep watering in full sun to very light shade, lippia can be used as a lawn replacement that looks best in summer. Bees and butterflies are attracted to its small pink and purple flower blossoms.

## Perennials

Sage

*Salvia* species



Sonoma sage, photo by April Owens



Hummingbird sage, photo by April Owens

Sages come in all shapes and sizes from groundcovers like *Salvia sonomensis* (Sonoma sage) to *Salvia clevelandii* (Cleveland's sage), a 4 ft. x 4 ft. flowering perennial. Salvias bloom in the spring with an abundance of purple to blue flowers that attract hummingbirds, butterflies and bumblebees. Natural oils give them their characteristic scent, which also can make them flammable. Maintain by cutting back by two-thirds annually to encourage lush foliage. Hydrate in the summer in warmer inland gardens.

California Fuchsia

*Epilobium canum*

California buckwheats

*Eriogonum* species and cultivars



*Epilobium canum* is a beautiful late summer blooming perennial that is native to California foothills and coastal areas. California fuchsia is notable for the profusion of bright scarlet flowers in summer and autumn, blooming when many other perennials have finished. This perennial tends to die back and go dormant in the winter. Easy to grow, California fuchsia will flower most profusely in full sun. In the wetter, northern part of its range or near the coast, this plant will typically require no supplemental water after establishment. It can be watered once a month, generally, without harming the plant. By late fall or early winter, plants tend to get straggly, but if cut back to the ground as soon as the flowers are spent, they will come back lush and healthy in the spring. One of the best native plants for attracting hummingbirds.

Monkeyflower

*Diplacus* species and cultivars



The genus *Eriogonum* is one of the most diverse in the California flora and provides native plant gardeners with a wealth of beautiful plants of varying form and color. *Eriogonum fasciculatum* forms a shrubby mound to 3' tall and 4' wide, though the cultivar 'Warriner Lytle' tops out at only half the height. *Eriogonum grande* var. *rubescens* is a perennial to 18" with lovely rose-pink flowers, while *Eriogonum umbellatum* features yellow flowers on a similarly sized plant. All of the California buckwheats have clusters of tiny flowers that are very attractive to pollinators, and are followed by seeds eaten by birds.

Coyote Mint

*Monardella villosa*



A monkeyflower hybrid, photo by April Owens

This colorful perennial grows to about 2 ft. tall and wide. *Diplacus aurantiacus* (sticky monkeyflower) occurs all over California from coastal to chaparral communities, and fits well into many landscapes.

Monkeyflower browns out in the heat of the summer, but will tolerate some water. Monkeyflower is a food source for hummingbirds, bees and other pollinating insects. Plant in sun to part shade and irrigate monthly in summer after established. There is a broad range of cultivars and hybrids in flower colors from red to white.



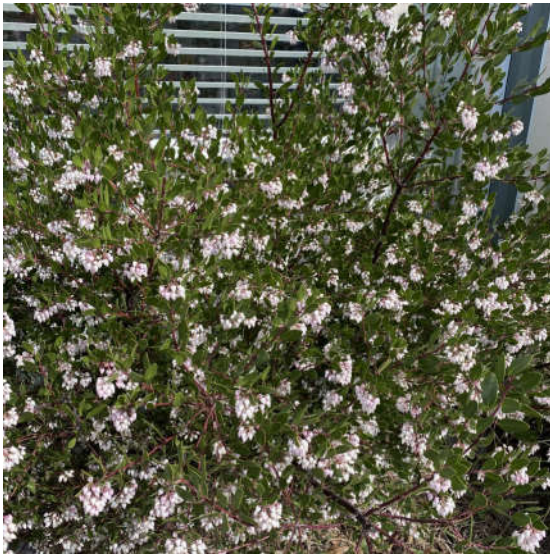
Coyote mint, photo by Jon Kanagy

Coyote mint grows up to 18 in. tall and 4 ft. plus wide if unpruned. It has a long blooming cycle, flowering through the summer and fall, attracting butterflies and hummingbirds. Songbirds eat the seeds. Cut back to a tight ball bi-annually to maintain lush foliage.

## Shrubs

Manzanita  
*Arctostaphylos* species

Coyote Brush  
*Baccharis pilularis*



*'Howard McMinn' manzanita, photo by April Owens*

Manzanitas are shrubs with huge habitat benefits. With proper maintenance and placement manzanitas, whether as specimens or a grouping, offer great value in the resilient garden. The manzanita berries attract mockingbirds, robins, and cedar waxwings. If unpruned they provide cover for quail and wren-tits and the flowers produce nectar for native bees and hummingbirds. *Arctostaphylos* 'Howard McMinn' is rounded in form and profusely branched, growing 3-6 ft. tall. It has shiny green leaves and abundant light pink flowers. Beautiful mahogany trunks create a wonderful sculptural effect. The dense foliage responds exceptionally well to pruning—even shearing, and tolerates a far greater range of soils and watering regimes than most manzanitas.

California Lilac  
*Ceanothus species*



*Coyote Brush photo by April Owens*

The upright form of coyote brush, growing 4-8 ft. tall and wide, is valued for its ability to flourish in a wide range of conditions. An excellent habitat plant, coyote brush provides food and cover to a wide variety of wildlife. Flowers are not showy on the male; female flowers are borne on separate shrubs. These plants produce ivory colored flowers with pollen and nectar. An abundance of pollinators and beneficial insects use *Baccharis* flowers. Plant in sun to light shade; coyote brush is not fussy about soils, and is quite drought tolerant once established. Coyote brush can tolerate hard pruning to keep it fire-wise. The habitat benefit of this shrub is worth some maintenance.

Toyon  
*Heteromeles arbutifolia*



*A California lilac in bloom, photo by April Owens*

Blueblossom ceanothus (*Ceanothus thyrsiflorus*) is an evergreen shrub growing from 15-20 ft. tall by 10-15 ft. wide. It prefers full sun to part shade and needs very little water once established. A beautiful purple flowering shrub, blueblossom attracts an array of wildlife including birds, butterflies, bees and other insects. It can be hedged to control size or pruned into a small tree.

'Concha' lilac (*Ceanothus 'Concha'*) is an evergreen shrub that grows 4-8 ft. tall with stunning, deep blue fragrant flowers in large clusters. 'Concha' is more compact than blueblossom ceanothus but has many of the same water and sun needs. 'Concha' is considered one of the most reliable and garden tolerant California lilac species. Many species of California native bees are attracted to this plant. Though it can tolerate light pruning, 'Concha' should be placed far apart from other plants to minimize pruning.

Flowering Currants and Gooseberries  
*Ribes species*



*Toyon berries, photo by Jon Kanagy*

Toyon, or Christmasberry, is a moderately fast growing evergreen shrub that is good for screening. It prefers full sun or part shade and needs little water once established, but can tolerate some garden water. Toyon has attractive deep green leaves, produces small white flowers in summer and red berries in winter. This is a great substitute for the invasive cotoneaster for bird habitat and screening. Toyon can tolerate pruning to be more tree-like or can be pruned lightly as a hedge.

Western Redbud  
*Cercis occidentalis*



Flowering currant, photo by Jon Kanagy

Flowering currants and gooseberries (*Ribes* species) are a colorful group of shrubs growing 6-8 ft. and blooming in late winter to early spring, providing an important early nectar source for bumblebees and hummingbirds. Flowering currants go dormant in the summer without some water and light shade. Clean off dead leaves that haven't fallen on their own in August in the fire-wise garden.

Coffeeberry  
*Frangula californica*



Western Redbud photo Kathi Dowdian

Western redbud (*Cercis occidentalis*) adds seasonality to the California native garden. Revealing its beautiful structure in the winter after losing its leaves, redbud produces beautiful small magenta flowers that cover the stems, attracting hummingbirds, bees, and other pollinators in the late winter. After flowering, redbuds sprout shiny heart-shaped leaves and later in summer are covered in purple seed pods. Redbuds prefer sun or part shade and need no irrigation once established. They grow 10-20 ft. tall and 10-15 ft. wide. Redbuds respond well to overall pruning and shaping in winter. They are native to the Sierra foothills and inner coastal ranges.

Blue Elderberry  
*Sambucus nigra* ssp. *caerulea*



*Coffeeberry, photo by April Owens*

Coffeeberry is an evergreen shrub with dark green foliage that can grow up to 15 ft., but more compact selections like 'Mound San Bruno' grow to 5 ft. tall by 6 ft. wide. Small, greenish-white flowers in spring are very attractive to pollinators, and are followed by black fruit relished by birds in the fall making coffeeberry a valuable plant for the habitat garden. It tolerates a wide variety of soil types, prefers afternoon shade in interior sites and appreciates some irrigation at most locations. Irrigated monthly in the summer, coffeeberry is a habitat powerhouse and a beautiful fire-wise screening shrub.

Oregon Grape  
*Mahonia aquifolium*



*Elderberry, photo by April Owens*

Blue elderberry is a very fast growing screening shrub up to 15 ft. tall that can be cut back to the ground every few years to encourage fresh new growth and as a fire-wise practice. It prefers full sun to part shade and tolerates drought once established. However, blue elderberry benefits from some summer moisture and will thrive in a regularly irrigated garden. Blue elderberry has glossy, bright green leaves that provide texture in the garden. The large, flat-topped clusters of creamy white flowers in early summer are a favorite of pollinators and the blue-black berries in late summer are a food source for birds and other wildlife.



*The holly-like leaves of Oregon grape,  
photo by Jon Kanagy*

Oregon grape is an evergreen shrub with holly-shaped glossy leaves that grows 3-7 ft. tall and 6 ft. wide and prefers shade or part shade. It has fragrant, yellow, nectar-rich flowers in winter/spring and dark blue berries in the fall, which can be used for jelly. Give Oregon grape moist, well drained soil. This shrub, which spreads by rhizomes, makes a hedgerow of prickly ground cover for birds and other wildlife. Keep it well irrigated in a fire-wise garden, although this shrub is drought tolerant once established.

---

#### Resources:

California Native Plant Society – [The Nature Restoration Approach](#)

---

We appreciate the contributors to this section:

[California Flora Nursery](#)  
[alscape.org](#)

ources:

[C Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County](#), [California Natives](#)  
[arin Chapter](#), [California Native Plant Society Plant Replacement List](#)

[California Flora Nursery](#)

[alscane](#) a native plant database from the California Native Plant Society



Sonoma Ecology Center works to address challenges related to water supply and quality, open space, rural character, biodiversity, energy, climate change, and a better quality of life for all residents.

<https://sonomaecologycenter.org/>



The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County has been extending educational outreach and providing technical assistance to home gardeners since 1981.

<https://sonomamg.ucanr.edu/>



The mission of the Habitat Corridor Project is to create and promote California native plant restoration gardens in the urban environment.

<http://habitatcorridorproject.org/>



The primary objective and purpose of FireSafe Sonoma is to provide education, exchange information and foster fire prevention and fire safety within the County of Sonoma.

<https://www.firesafesonoma.org/>



Sonoma Ecology Center works to address challenges related to water supply and quality, open space, rural character, biodiversity, energy, climate change, and a better quality of life for all residents.

<https://sonomaecologycenter.org/>



The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County has been extending educational outreach and providing technical assistance to home gardeners since 1981.

<https://sonomamg.ucanr.edu/>



The mission of the Habitat Corridor Project is to create and promote California native plant restoration gardens in the urban environment.

<http://habitatcorridorproject.org/>



The primary objective and purpose of FireSafe Sonoma is to provide education, exchange information and foster fire prevention and fire safety within the County of Sonoma.

<https://www.firesafesonoma.org/>



Funding for the Resilient Landscapes Coalition is provided by a Vegetation Management Project Grant from the County of Sonoma