Ahh, autumn! Northern California may not have the extravagant fall color displays that bring tour buses to New England, but I would not trade our long mild fall season, perfect for enjoying the outdoors and working in the garden; and we have our own brilliant natives worthy of planting.

Northern California’s native trees and shrubs include both yellow and red fall foliage, and occur in both wet and dry habitats. Grouping species with similar irrigation and sun exposure needs will simplify care and increase the likelihood that your native plants will thrive.

Researchers have recently discovered that, while yellow leaf pigments are present all season and are unmasked in the fall as green chlorophyll decays, producing yellow fall foliage, red pigments are actually manufactured just as autumn arrives. These pigments, called anthocyanins, protect leaves to allow gradual rather than sudden shutdown of photosynthesis and greater recovery of stored nitrogen; and may even deter insect attacks.

One of the easiest native plants for irrigated garden beds is California grape, *Vitis californica*. Most of the hundreds of volunteer grape seedlings in my garden turn yellow in the fall, but a few are pink, salmon, or even scarlet. I take care to leave these when weeding excess grape plants. This deciduous vine will climb whatever is available, whether oak tree or fence, and if nothing vertical is handy, will become a vigorous ground cover.

Brilliant yellow-to-orange hued shrubs for damp places, with part shade in hotter parts of our area, include western spicebush, *Calycanthus occidentalis*; buttonwillow, *Cephalanthus occidentalis*; and Rocky Mountain maple, *Acer glabrum*. For pink to red foliage,
try dogwoods (*Cornus sericea* and *Cornus nuttallii*); vine maple, *Acer circinatum*; and western azalea, *Rhododendron occidentale*.

In drier, sunny parts of the landscape, you can count on western redbud, *Cercis occidentalis*, and skunkbush, *Rhus trilobata*, to provide orange to red color in autumn. In a larger garden, our stately black oak, *Quercus kelloggii*, can be planted for fine yellow color.

If you are lucky enough to have a pond with room to plant along the edge, umbrella plant, *Darmera peltata*, can provide dramatic fall color, in addition to early pink flowers and lush tropical looking leaves all summer.

When selecting plants for fall color, visit the nursery in autumn to choose the best-colored plants, as individuals of the same species do vary in leaf pigments. And for added color in your fall garden display, don’t forget to mix your bright-foliaged fall plants with fall-blooming natives such as California fuchsia, *Epilobium canum*, and plants with brightly colored fruits, including wild roses and toyon, *Heteromeles arbutifolium*.

The brilliant yellow leaves of western spicebush are just the thing to brighten up a shaded, damp spot in the garden. Photo by Ken DeCamp.

Typical redbud fall colors shade from yellow to orange. Photo by Ken DeCamp.

The giant leaves of umbrella plant may turn several different colors at once. Photo by Julie Kierstead Nelson.