Water-wise gardening discussions have occurred for years, but the recent California drought has elevated interest in less thirsty landscaping.

My goal here is to offer water-wise landscaping ideas with an emphasis on drought-tolerant native plants. A common misconception about California native plants is, “They require little or no water.” Most are drought tolerant when they are planted in their natural range—and once they are established.

Some native plants planted outside their natural range consume large amounts of summer water to survive, like the coast redwood in Redding.

Even though lawn replacement is a growing trend throughout California, some people will not relinquish their lawns. Fortunately native plant “turfs” exist that require less water, fertilizer, and labor. These include herbal lawns such as yarrow (for sun) and yerba buena (for shade), meadows of bunchgrasses (fescue, blue grama grass, California melic grass, and purple needlegrass—the state grass), or warm-season native grasses that tolerate regular foot traffic with UC Verde® buffalograss considered best for our climate.

A California native plant is commonly defined as a plant existing in the California floristic province before European settlement. The California floristic province is composed of biotic communities spreading from southern Oregon, down California, and into Baja California. A biotic community hosts interdependent organisms that inhabit a particular region.

The Redding area contains several biotic communities: oak woodland, chaparral, mixed-evergreen forest, grassland, and riparian. The plants

California fuchsia ‘Wess’ is a summer-through-fall bloomer and hummingbird heaven. Photo by Doug Mandel.
in these communities have adapted to local climate, water availability, soils, and wildlife. They exist without the intervention (watering, soil amending, pest controlling) of humans. A good way to explore these communities is to join a guided field trip with the Shasta Chapter of the California Native Plant Society (CNPS; shastacnps.org).

An important objective of landscaping with native plants, and landscaping in general, is planting the right plant in the right location. Spending time reading and researching increases your success and ultimately saves time and money. Start with the site analysis: size, sun/shade, soil/drainage, wet/dry, flat/sloped, deer pressure, fire threat, wind, views, and proximity to existing structures. Try, as the CNPS suggests, to “select plants that suit the site rather than to modify the site to suit the plants.”

The fun but challenging next step is deciding what plant characteristics you desire. Think about size and form; rate of growth; evergreen or deciduous; foliage texture and color; colors of flowers, berries, and seedpods; timing of flowering; scent of flowers and foliage; fall color; fire and deer resistance; attracting pollinators and other wildlife; soil/drainage and water requirements. The early design phase of the garden should emphasize hydrozoning, grouping plants with the same water requirements in the same watering zone, which will promote efficient watering.

The native plant garden is a habitat garden that inevitably attracts lizards, frogs, birds, butterflies, bees, beneficial bugs (most insects are beneficial), and other fauna. Wildlife require water, food, and shelter. A steady supply of food consists of flowers and fruit emerging during the different seasons. Groupings of trees, shrubs, herbaceous perennials, annuals, groundcovers, grasses, and vines create layers of shelter for the different creatures. Natural predators keep garden pests in check and maintain a healthier, balanced garden. The habitat garden provides one with a “sense of place.”

Once the site information, the desired plant characteristics, and the design of the garden are established, it’s time to choose and find the plants. Tour the local biotic communities mentioned earlier, consult enthusiastic volunteers and workers at native plant sales and nurseries, visit local residential native plant gardens and native plant community gardens (Celebration Garden at the North Valley Art League Carter House, Turtle Bay Arboretum and Botanical Gardens, and Shasta College Demonstration Garden), peruse the Sunset Western Garden Book and the Internet (shastacnps.org, laspilitas.com, and shrb.blogspot.com). Many California native plants tolerate an array of soils and climate zones, but you will succeed more often and consume fewer resources if you choose from native plants that thrive in our biotic communities.

The plants have arrived, now to plant and maintain the garden. Fall is the best time to plant; warm soil and rain will help establish a healthy root system. Spring is a distant second best time to plant natives in our “extreme” Mediterranean climate. Weed control is essential before planting. Generally, avoid amending the native soil when planting; top off with 2 to 4 inches of mulch, keeping it away from the trunk (avoids rot and disease).

Ordinarily, native plants flourish in nutrient-poor soils. Avoid fertilizing, especially during the hot months or when the plants are dormant. Mulch lowers water demand by reducing moisture evaporation from the soil. It also stabilizes the soil and root temperature, offers a finished look, and hides drip irrigation. Organic mulch for woodland and forest gardens (mimics decaying leaves and branches) improves soil structure and supports biological activity. Since organic mulch quickly decomposes during our hot summers, frequent reapplication is necessary.

During the first few years, the native plants need babying (mulching and watering) until established. Always water to the root depth. As the plants mature, adjust the watering to cover the spreading roots. Once established, water deeply and infrequently. This promotes deeper rooting that better tolerates drought conditions. Also during drought conditions, remember to thoroughly water the California native plants throughout the normal “rainy” season. If you plant the right drought-tolerant native plant in the right spot,
once established it will require little if any summer watering. A few noteworthy examples include silver bush lupine, foothill penstemon, Douglas’s iris, some buckwheat species, white sage, Cleveland sage, wooly blue curls, California coffeeberry, some ceanothus species, toyon, flannel bush, and western redbud.

One of the rewards of drought-tolerant native plant gardening is the relatively low amount of maintenance. A misconception is that native plant gardens take “no maintenance.” Remove broken and crossing branches, pest-riddled or infested parts, and some faded flowers. Weeding is imperative, because weeds compete with the desired plants for resources and can harbor pests and diseases. Pest and disease monitoring is always vital, sometimes necessitating replanting. Routine and thoughtful maintenance will keep the native plant garden looking its best.

The vast majority of native plant gardens are informal, exemplified by natural spaces. If you desire a more ordered, pristine, and manicured garden, a native plant garden might not be your cup of tea. Life is like a native plant garden, sometimes appearing messy and untidy. However, once the whole experience comes together, you have a sustainable, pleasurable, and gratifying native plant garden.