

Native Plants in Your Fire-Smart Landscaping

by Laura Lovett

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In the face of increasing risk of fires sweeping our neighborhoods, along with hardening our structures against fire, we should assess our landscaping with the goal of reducing fuels. Features such as a landmark tree, a screening hedge, and sculptural bushes may be fire hazards, depending on the plant species, but the same effects may well be achieved by using native plants.

A yard filled with plants native to the area can form the basis for a fire-smart landscape, as well as provide ecosystem benefits and require less irrigation. Native plants have an important role to play in fire-smart landscaping because they are a natural and historical part of this ecosystem. Including natives in our home gardens provides for the entire ecosystem, not solely for human needs.

With careful planning, you can have an aesthetically pleasing and fire-smart yard. Reduction of plant fuels is a key component, but defensible space doesn't require the removal of all vegetation to be effective. We will not be able to completely eliminate fire, but we can take steps that will alter the behavior of fire in ways that reduce flame length and fire intensity.

Since 2019, the Marin Chapter of CNPS has been in an ongoing dialogue with the Marin County Fire Department and the Marin Wildfire Protection Agency about ways to have habitat gardens while also addressing community needs for fire safety.

In our eagerness to import all sorts of new species from around the globe for both agricultural and ornamental use, humans have deliberately or accidentally introduced many plants that not only thrive but grow excessively well here. Many of these invasive plants are also fire-prone, damaging our landscapes twice over.

Climate scientists predict that we will have hotter and drier weather in coming decades, with less rainfall and more drought years. A landscape of California native plants requires significantly less water to thrive. In fact, many plants, once established, do just fine on winter rains. Even plants from other Mediterranean climates require more water to stay healthy than our native ones do. Keeping plants hydrated is important for fire resistance. An unhealthy, struggling plant is a fire-prone plant.

Native plants are the base of the food chain. Over millennia, our native pollinators and other creatures have become specifically adapted to our native plants for their food, shelter, and reproductive needs. They cannot make use of imported plants; without natives they starve. Our native trees are particularly important, often supporting hundreds of small mammals, birds, and invertebrates.

The rainy season is the perfect time to start thinking about which parts of your garden need to be addressed for fire safety and what would be on your wish list to create a glorious garden that is not fire-prone.

The Marin Chapter of the CNPS has assembled lists of California native plants recommended for use as replacements for those species considered fire prone by FIRESafe Marin. Plants are grouped into seven general plant sizes and functions: large trees, small trees, hedging shrubs, medium height shrubs, groundcovers, large grasses and vines. Fire-prone plants are noted in each category together with our recommendations for replacements.



The Marin Chapter of the CNPS has many resources to help you create a beautiful, fire-safe and wildlife-friendly garden. Photo by Laura Lovett

Each plant has a link to a plant card that includes information about sun exposure, watering needs, flowers and fruit, deer resistance and more. The lists can be found at cnpsmarin.org.

When planning a garden that includes native plants, these are some key points to consider:

This is not a list of fireproof plants. All plants will burn under the right conditions. Do not expect to plant it and forget it!

For defensible space, plant placement and maintenance are as important as the plant species you choose. Maintenance includes proper watering; it is particularly important to keep your plants hydrated during fire season. If you don't maintain your plants, you have wasted the benefit gained from making smarter choices to start with. Information about plant placement and maintenance is available in depth on the FIRESafe Marin and Marin Master Gardener web sites. We urge you to review their recommendations before you decide on plant locations and spacing.

Failure to maintain both your house and your landscape in a fire-safe condition can result in loss of life and property during fire! Your first concern in the landscape should be to create noncombustible zones around your structures; the first five feet out from the structure should not include anything that is flammable. This includes plants, decorative bark, woodpiles, trash cans, wooden gates, barbecues, decorations, etc.

Native plants provide superior environmental benefits. All replacement plants on the list are native to California. They provide superior ecosystem services to us and to the other creatures with whom we share this earth, particularly birds and insects. They are the irreplaceable foundation of nature's food chain. Native plants are tough, beautiful, and highly adapted to our climate. We don't need to look abroad for ideas on what to put in our gardens. This list includes just some of the many lovely and garden-friendly native plants that should do well around your home.

Native plants do better when planted at the right time. Native plants are not grown on an artificially sustained schedule as happens at commercial nurseries. Native plants tend to be available for planting when they are most likely to thrive. This means that plants are healthier when they come to you, but some species may be available only during certain months of the year.

Local nurseries that sell native plants include: The Watershed Nursery, Richmond; CNL Native Plant Nursery, Mill Valley; Green Jeans Garden Supply, Mill Valley; O'Donnell's Nursery, Fairfax; and Sloat Garden Centers. CNPS also features many suitable plants at the Marin Chapter's spring and fall plant sales.

*This article was adapted from information on the CNPS Marin Chapter website www.cnpsmarin.org
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