



Santa Barbara
Botanic Garden

The Native Plant Tool Kit

This is Santa Barbara Botanic Garden's resource guide for knowing and growing biodiversity through gardening with native plants. Here, we present a list of tools, ideas, and practices that have been curated to inspire hope and empower stewardship of the ecosystems that sustain us, and the planet.

Whether you're a seasoned native plant ambassador, or someone who is just getting acquainted with the power of native plants, you'll find helpful tips, tricks, and opportunities in this tool kit. We hope this guide can be a resource as you continue your native plant journey. The goal is to advance our collective mission to conserve native plants for the health and well-being of our communities and the planet.

We recommend you think about approaching your relationship with plants one step at a time. If you don't know where to start, here is what you'll find in this tool kit:

- **Get To Know Native Plants:** Encourages ways to spend time observing and connecting with native plants in nature
- **Explore the Science Driving Native-Plant Conservation:** Teaches more about the science that drives native plant conservation and the Garden's ongoing work to understand, protect, and restore
- **Ready, Set, Grow:** Includes tips and tricks to help you start and advance your native plant garden
- **Grow Your Impact:** Offers inspiration and ways to track your progress, and share updates with us so you can help further the native plant movement

Step 1: Get To Know Native Plants

Once you are aware of native plants, you'll start to notice them everywhere: along sidewalks, in parks, in natural areas, and perhaps even in your backyard in Southern California or many other regions. If you're a longtime native plant fan or a natural history newbie, it's always fun to take a moment and enjoy a slow walk to admire the plants around you.

Where To Go

The Garden is a wonderful place to explore native plants. To better acquaint yourself with California's unique flora, we recommend visiting the 11 unique Garden sections and various displays spanning many of the region's diverse habitats. There are also excellent places beyond our 78-acres (31.5 hectares), including Elings Park, Los Padres National Forest, Channel Islands National Park, and Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. To spark your curiosity, here are just a few photos from some of our work on Landscape Transformation Projects across the region.

If you're looking for more inspiration and want to continue learning about native plants, follow us on one of our social channels (or all of them!), attend an [upcoming Garden event](#), and/or [visit SBBotanicGarden.org](#) to read more about ongoing native plant conservation efforts to restore habitat throughout the central coast and beyond.

Develop a Practice

Nature's stories are unfolding all around us. From birds eating a certain berry, to the variety of insects on a gumweed flower (*Grindelia* spp.), there are always amazing interactions and seasonal changes taking place in our midst. Try making a habit of noticing the stories of nature unfolding around you and then reinforce your practice by recording your observations. This can be through making lists of your observations, sketching, photography, or other forms of field note taking.

Over time, consistent observations become useful data points that continue to help scientists decode the relationships between native plants, biodiversity, and healthy communities.

Tools like [iNaturalist](#) and [eBird](#) are great ways to record nature observations using your phone. You can get started by joining us for a [Garden-led class using iNaturalist](#) or one of our monthly bird walks where we often use eBird. [The Garden's calendar](#) is always getting updated with new opportunities, so be sure to check often.

Set a Weekly Goal To Connect

Start by setting aside 10 minutes every week to spend time in a relatively quiet, native -plant habitat. A hike on one of our many trails across the region, a morning walk at the Garden (dogs are always welcome and members' hour is extra quiet), or even a stroll around a patch of native plants in your neighborhood are all great options. For more analog naturalists, nature journaling and sketching are great ways to build upon your nature observation practice.

Step 2: Explore the Science Driving Native-Plant Conservation

Native plants are the foundation of healthy ecosystems, supporting biodiversity, stabilizing soils, conserving water, and helping landscapes adapt to a changing climate. At the Garden, conserving these plants begins with science, and our work is guided by a thoughtful, layered approach that turns knowledge into action. Our work ranges from front yards to remote locales, saving some of California's rarest plants. We approach each project with curiosity and a desire to promote biodiversity and healthy ecosystems. Our observations lead to actionable best practices for landowners, land managers, and habitat stewards across the central coast of California — and beyond.

In many cases, research is lacking regarding which species, maintenance practices, and irrigation schedules best promote habitat and resilience. Fortunately, we have 100 years of experience and expertise informing our recommendations. You can read more about the Garden's conservation programs, but here are a few of the ways we continue to grow biodiversity.

- Follow the landscape transformations underway at Elings Park, at Alice Keck Park Memorial Gardens, and in Cuyama Valley. Through these projects we're showcasing how science, restoration, and community action work together to remove invasive plants, support agriculture, build climate resilience, and support biodiversity across California.
- The Garden's climate-forward planting experiment at Elings Park is testing Southern California native plants in new conditions to see which thrive, support pollinators, and could help guide future resilient, biodiversity-focused gardens. Watch our four-part miniseries to learn more about our exciting work at Elings.

- Learn how the Garden is using coast live oaks (*Quercus agrifolia*) as a living fuelbreak to reduce wildfire risk, demonstrating that native oaks can provide safety, biodiversity, and long-term ecological benefits.
- Discover how the Garden is researching Hoover's bentgrass (*Agrostis hooveri*) as a California native lawn alternative — testing its growth, resilience, and suitability for home landscapes to promote water-wise, biodiverse, and sustainable lawns.
- Review a list of publications from Garden staff. From peer-reviewed journal articles to international conservation status reports, our Conservation and Research Department is working to document and protect some of California's most precious plants and their habitats

This is just a small sample of articles featuring the Garden's conservation work. To explore further and learn more, be sure to subscribe to our mailing list and [bookmark our Insights page here](#).

Attend the Annual Conservation Symposium (in person or via livestream)

The annual Santa Barbara Botanic Garden Conservation Symposium, presented by the Nakashima-Rennie family, is a dynamic event for anyone passionate about protecting California's native plants and ecosystems. Each year, the Symposium explores engaging themes, from plant conservation and habitat restoration to pollinator health and climate resilience. You can attend in person, watch live, or catch recorded sessions on YouTube, making it easy to learn from leading scientists and conservationists while connecting with a community dedicated to sustaining biodiversity.

Each year we select an Honorable John C. Pritzlaff Conservation Award recipient, recognizing achievements in conservation both in California and around the world. Prior recipients include Doug Tallamy (2026); Peggy Olwell (2025); Shirley C. Tucker, Ph.D. (2024); Kate Faulkner, Peter Schuyler, and Grupo de Ecología y Conservación de Islas (2023); and more.

Step 3: Ready, Set, Grow

Once you understand the power of native plants, the next step is putting that knowledge into action. Native plants bring beauty, biodiversity, and resilience back into everyday places, from front yards and balconies to school campuses and shared community spaces. No space is too small to make a difference.

Native plants create the ecological framework that wildlife depends on. Even a handful of well-chosen plants can provide food, shelter, and connection. The transformation underway at Elings Park shows how native plants can restore landscapes that were once dominated by invasive species and how intentional choices can lead to lasting change.

Are you ready to get started? The following section highlights some of the fundamentals to gardening with native plants.

From Curiosity to Action: Planning Your Space

Inviting native plants into your life does not require a traditional garden. Start by identifying where planting is possible. This might be a neglected corner of your yard, a section of lawn you are ready to replace, a single pot on a porch or balcony, or an underused space at work, school, or a place of worship.

Once you identify a space, take note of your site conditions. Notice how sunlight moves throughout the day, where wind is strongest, and how water drains after rain. These simple observations will guide plant selection and help ensure your garden is well matched to its conditions.

Equally important is thinking about care. Ask who will be responsible for maintaining the garden once it is planted. Whether it is you, a group of volunteers, or a hired professional, maintenance capacity plays a major role in long-term success. Planning with care in mind allows your garden to thrive, not just survive.

Once you know where you can grow some native plants and identify who will be responsible for maintenance, you'll want to Establish Your Garden Goals. If you're doing more than just a few containers, remember our 3 Tips for Mastering Garden Design and start thinking about what it takes to create a year-round thriving garden.

Choosing Your Plants: Selecting Habitat Heroes

California's native plants follow a seasonal rhythm that is different from much of the country. Working with this cycle helps gardens establish more easily and reduces the need for excess water and intervention. To get into the rhythm of gardening in California, consider these annual cycles:

- November to February: Planting typically begins in late fall and continues through winter, when cooler temperatures and seasonal rains support strong root growth. Early blooms from plants like manzanitas (*Arctostaphylos* spp.) often appear during this time.
- March to June: Spring brings the most visible burst of color, as annuals and perennials flower. Poppies (Family *Papaveraceae*), California lilacs (*Ceanothus* spp.), and sages (*Salvia* spp.) are especially active, supporting a wide range of pollinators.
- July to October: By summer and early fall, many native plants enter a period of dormancy. While the landscape may look quieter, species such as buckwheats (*Eriogonum* spp.), California fuschia (*Epilobium canum*), and goldenrod (*Solidago* spp.) continue to provide essential resources for insects and wildlife.

As you plan, think beyond individual plants and consider three-dimensional structure. A layered garden with open areas, ground covers, shrubs, and canopies creates habitat for birds, butterflies, and other wildlife throughout their life cycles.

Gardening in Rhythm with California's Seasons

If you're looking for plants to add to your neighborhood that will make a big impact, here are five easy-to-find, easy-to-grow bona fide habitat heroes:

- [California bush sunflower](#) (*Encelia californica*)
- [Deer grass](#) (*Muhlenbergia rigens*)
- [Coast live oak](#) (*Quercus agrifolia*)
- [Toyon](#) (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*)
- [Lemonade berry](#) (*Rhus integrifolia*)

Here are a few more that are seen in yards, commercial landscapes, and school campuses:

- [Pigeon Point](#) coyote brush (*Baccharis pilularis* 'Pigeon Point')
- [Yankee Point](#) ceanothus (*Ceanothus thyrsiflorus* var. *griseus* 'Yankee Point')
- [Canyon Gray](#) California sagebrush (*Artemisia californica* 'Canyon Gray')

For more ideas, explore the [Garden's Water-Wise Native Plant Guide](#), which features more than 100 climate-adapted species. Additional planning tools such as [easy-to-grow native plants](#), our various native plant shopping lists, and the [Plant This, Not That](#) guide can help narrow choices and build confidence. If you have more questions, you can also stop by the Garden Nursery and/or [book a consultation with one of our pros](#).

To continue learning, [the Garden's calendar](#) offers opportunities ranging from beginner gardening to bird watching and even forest bathing. Our partners at Calscape also provide robust tools to help you plan, select plants for pollinators, and understand watering and maintenance needs. Here are a few of our favorites:

- [Plan your garden with Calscape](#)
- [Find plants for pollinators](#)
- [Watering native plants](#)
- [Weed and pest control](#)

Care for What You Grow: Seasonal Maintenance

Gardening is an ongoing relationship. Establishing native plants is only the beginning, and thoughtful maintenance helps landscapes mature and thrive over time.

Home gardeners may find it helpful to take a seasonal maintenance class at the Garden. If attending in person is not possible, have a look at these video resources:

- [Get Horticulture'd video series](#)
- [Winter Wonders webinar](#)
- [Plant Establishment Trials experiment](#)

If you work with a landscaper, consider supporting their participation in the [California Native Plant Landscaper Certification \(CNPLC\) program](#). If you are seeking the services of a professional gardener, you can [access our full list of CNPLC graduates](#) who are trained in native plant care and maintenance and ready to help you!

Step 4: Grow Your Impact

The native plant movement grows through people like you. As you go deeper in this journey, others may notice and become curious about your newfound zest for life resulting from your relationships with plants. Sharing what you are learning helps build momentum and strengthen community connections.

Use **#MyNativePlantJourney** to document your progress and inspire others.

Looking for a challenge? See how quickly you can reach 35 points:

- Bring a friend to [visit the Garden](#) (+5 points)
- [Share the Native Plant Pledge](#) (+5 points)
- Spend 5 minutes observing (admiring) native plants (+2 points)
- Post a photo of your project using **#MyNativePlantJourney** (+5 points)
- Encourage your school, workplace, or HOA to plant natives (+7 points)
- Work with a [certified native plant landscape professional](#) (+15 points)
- Support nurseries that prioritize native species (+10 points)
- Join an online native plant community (+2 points)
- [Santa Barbara Botanic Garden Facebook](#)
- [Santa Barbara Botanic Garden Instagram](#)
- [Reddit Ceanothus](#)
- [California Native Plants Facebook](#)
- Join and attend a local [California Native Plant Society meeting](#) (+5 points)

Every action, big or small, helps grow healthier landscapes and stronger communities rooted in native plants. We want to hear about all the ways you are making an impact out there. It can be anything. Share your stories, photos, ideas, advice — we want to hear it all.