

## **Our Conversion to Low Water Landscaping**

When we moved into our Redlands home in September 2008 the grass was dead or dying. It didn't bother us, however, because we planned to convert most of the lawn to native or drought resistant landscaping, especially after doing this at our previous San Diego home. Six months later, I'm happy to report the project has been very successful -- a few plants have died but most are thriving. Instead of watering the lawn three times weekly, we water the natives about once/month, considerably reducing our water bill. There's also little need for landscape services since the no-fuss plants generally take care of themselves.

From our two experiences here are some tips we've learned.

**Design:** In both places we featured a dry steam bed, with rock ranging in size from boulders to river gravel. Plants among rocks are not only visually appealing but the plant roots can remain cooler underneath the rocks. In our first home, we hired a landscaper to do the design and all the planting. In Redlands we hired a local landscape contractor, Jarney Fowler, for all the rock work, but we purchased and planted the plants ourselves. Our design revolved around the original fountain and two dragon trees (*dracaena draco*), a unique low water tree from the Canary Islands. We used redwood mulch to cut down on weeds and water.

**When to Plant:** We began the rock work in December and planted in January. The best months for planting natives are from fall through early winter. Though landscapers say you can do anytime with adequate water, planting during the cooler months allow a strong root system to grow before the summer heat hits.

**Why Natives:** Plants native to our area have adapted to the rainless months, so greatly reduce water needs. They also attract a host of wildlife and useful insects. A hummingbird claimed the new landscape as territory soon after we planted, while a pair of California towhees daily work the ground, mining the pillbugs that multiplied under the mulch. Others include numerous ladybugs that eat the aphids, and an assortment of butterflies, and yes, plenty of bees. Because something higher up on the natural food chain takes advantage, there's little worry about pests.

**Favorite Plants:** We prefer California native plants and their hybrids, but also use plants from other Mediterranean type climates. We also make exceptions: since we left a little piece of grass under one tree, we planted some blueberry plants to reap the extra water.

The following native or drought tolerant plants have done well in Redlands:

For hot sunny areas: sages (particularly Cleveland), manzanita, buckwheats (many varieties available, great for butterflies) ceanothus (dark star but others), grasses (deergrass, Mexican feather, blue-eyed grass), manzanita (all types), toyon, rosemary, yarrow, buckwheat, fremontia (flannel bush, very drought tolerant), penstemons, rosemary, fuschsias, and succulents such as agaves, dudleya, and yucca.

For shadier areas, consider currants (wide variety), redberry, mahonia (especially golden abundance), sedge, and oregon grape

**How to replace grass:** We had it easy – the grass was dead when we moved it in. But you can stop watering the grass and allow it to die (good idea to tell your neighbors your plan) and follow with pre-emergent herbicide treatment to kill any grasses lurking underground. Because you need to wait 6- 8 weeks before planting (otherwise it kills the plants you put in) we didn't use any pre-emergent, so instead we pull any grass that comes up.

**Watering:** The most important watering is the first time you plant. It's important after planting to water a lot and deeply so deep tap roots get established. It's said you can't water too much at planting. For the first month or so, make sure the root ball stays moist so water once/week, more often if it's hot, or less if the rainy season has begun. Natives differ some in how much water they like but in general, water once/weekly during the first summer. Once established after several years, most natives can go without water, or can benefit from a monthly watering. Tree of Life Nursery has an online catalog that includes individual water needs -

[www.californianativeplants.com/index.php/plants/plant-catalog](http://www.californianativeplants.com/index.php/plants/plant-catalog)

**Where to Purchase Plants:** Local nurseries will have rosemary, yarrow and some varieties of manzanita and ceanothus. Many others we bought at the nursery at Rancho Santa Ana Botanical Garden in Claremont, a great place to also see natives in their natural setting. The nursery closes in summer, and they have two large plant sales, one in the fall, and one in early spring. Others specializing in natives include Tree of Life Nursery in San Juan Capistrano and Las Pilitas in Escondido. There are likely others that we're not aware of.

**Resources:** Feel free to contact me via email, Linda Richards at [richards@futureone.com](mailto:richards@futureone.com)  
Also, here are some useful links:

- Las Pilitas – [www.laspilitas.com](http://www.laspilitas.com) (great plant descriptions and planting instructions)
- California Native Plant Society - <http://www.cnps.org/>
- Tree of Life Nursery – [www.californianativeplants.com](http://www.californianativeplants.com)
- Rancho Santa Ana Botanical Gardens - [www.rsabg.org/content/view/230/165/](http://www.rsabg.org/content/view/230/165/)

Happy planting!

Linda Richards and Thomas Gillett