



California Native Plant Society

Dedicated to the Preservation of California Native Flora

Orange County Chapter

WINTER CHORES FOR NATIVE GARDENS

by Dan Songster

As the weather cools and plant growth slows we often find we have time off from routine garden work, allowing us to leisurely pursue jobs suited to the cooler months. So rather than sitting and sipping a hot mug of whatever while leafing through promising seed catalogs, we utilize this ideal time to get our gardens ready for the coming spring, a season full of its own pleasant but demanding distractions.

Pruning: For those natives that benefit from trimming, winter is the very best time to prune, shear, or in some cases hack away in your garden.

Desert Willow (*Chilopsis linearis*), Mexican Elderberry (*Sambucus mexicanum*), Water Birch (*Betula fontinalis*), and False Indigo Bush (*Amorpha fruticosa*) often lack structure. During winter they are bare of leaf making it much easier to select and prune out unwanted crossing and cluttering branches. The cuts you make in winter will direct spring's growth.

Shearing about one third of foliage volume suits Cleveland Sage (*Salvia clevelandii*), Island Snapdragon (*Galvesia speciosa*), and Coyote Mint (*Monardella villosa*). This helps create a more compact plant that is more densely flowered in spring. Lighter shearing (if any) is used on Chaparral Mallow (*Malacothamnus fasciculatus*), Hollyleaf Cherry (*Prunus ilicifolia*), and Woolly Blue Curls (*Trichostema lanatum*).

Matilija Poppy (*Romneya coulteri*), Coast Sunflower (*Encelia californica*), and Wild Rose (*Rosa californica*) do well with a severe pruning, to the ground, every year or two (every year for sure with the *Romneya*). California Fuchsia (*Epilobium californica*) can also be treated in this manner. All these plants are fast growers and, with the exception of *Encelia*, spread quickly by underground rhizomes. Care should be taken in placing these aggressive plants in your garden.

Some mature grasses and grass-like plants benefit by a close cropping every year or two. The Needlegrasses (*Nassella spp.*) and Melica Grass (*Melicaimperfecta*) are good examples of graceful but eventually messy plants. Fresh growth is promoted by giving a haircut with a sharp pair of hand pruners or a weed eater. I have found mature Blue-eyed Grass (*Sisyrinchium bellum*) to respond nicely to this treatment as well. But not all grasses enjoy or need such artificial grazing. Deer Grass (*Muhlenbergia rigens*), Purple Three-awn Grass (*Aristida purpurea*), and the lovely blue-colored Red Fescues (*Festucarubra* cvs.) are three which seem to prefer being left alone and still look stunning most of the year.

Now is a great time to trim and train your native vines. Heart-leaved Penstemon (*Keckiella cordifolia*) lacks the tendrils needed for solo climbing but looks excellent along a fence. Fasten stems to the fence with adhesive discs with twist ties, to bring their blooms up to eye level. It prefers cool roots so be sure to mulch. California Grape (*Vitis californica*) enjoys a good pruning too. I usually take about a third off young plants, to just above a growth point. Older, established plants can usually be trimmed back as hard as needed without harm. Vines pulling away from fence or arbor should be held in place with stretch tie. Virgin's Bower (*Clematis spp.*) looks best hanging from the lower branches of a small tree or draped down the side of a large shrub. Disobedient runners should be wound up through

the host plant before the new, tender growth of spring sprouts.

Transplanting: Cooler temperatures and higher humidity mean less shock to the plant you are moving. Often such moves can actually stimulate new growth and vigor in a plant that was unhappy in its prior spot. Have the new hole dug to right depth before carefully lifting the plant from its old home, and gently set it into place. Install with the root crown slightly above the surrounding grade. Unless rain is imminent create a basin and water immediately. Do not fertilize!

Wildflowers: If you have seeded your garden with wildflowers they probably share their seed bed with several non-native annuals. It is best to weed these areas while the weeds are small and easy to pull, before they begin competing for the nutrients and water the wildflowers need. This is much easier if you know what wildflower and weed seedlings look like.

Snails and slugs seem to prefer wildflowers over weeds so, whether using bait or a home remedy, go after them!

Stem Rot: One of the most important duties accomplished by the native gardener regardless of season is an inspection of root crowns. There should be **NO** mulch up against plant stems or tree trunks. Even more important, no soil should be washed up against trunks. This happens most commonly on inclines when a watering basin cut into the slope fills with soil washed from above, but it can also occur in level situations if plants are installed too low and surrounding soil slowly washes in. Such conditions provide just the right environment for stem rot, almost sure death for the plant. Scrape away soil until you get to the surface roots of the plant. This is especially important with woody perennials and trees. If the plant is too low, raise it.

Propagation: Fall is the time to divide older plants of Douglas Iris. If they have been undisturbed for three years or more dividing will stimulate spring blooming, and you'll end up with some extra plants for the garden or some happy neighbor. Simply loosen the soil around all sides of the clump using a garden fork or spade then lift out the entire plant. I set it on a waist-high table to work. Clip back the older leaves with sharp pruners and knock most of the soil off the root ball. Be ruthless! Or use a hose and nozzle to wash off the soil. This allows you to see how the roots fit together so that you can untangle them and pull apart the sections of iris. Now you are

ready to plant them in pots or in your garden. Mix one-third Perlite with the soil for improved drainage.

As the season progresses you will notice seedlings from various native plants in your garden. No, these are not weeds! Monkeyflower, Buckwheat, California Lilac, Blue-eyed Grass, Columbine, Chaparral Mallow, and California Poppy (prolific!) are among those that seed themselves. They can be carefully dug, potted up, and planted in the fall in suitable locations, or given to worthy friends.

Support: A bit of movement is a good thing to thicken and strengthen the trunks of young trees or shrubs, but flopping back and forth in the winter winds often causes roots to be torn from the trunk. Lightly tie your trees or shrubs to 2 stakes placed up to a foot away on either side of the trunk. This gives them room to bend and flex but limits extreme movement. When the plant's root system is secure, remove the support.

Wet Soil: Yes, there is always plenty to do in a garden and even low maintenance natives do best with some care. Unfortunately, during the wet season we must be cautious not to ruin the structure of our garden's soils. Most importantly we should avoid compacting our clay soil by trampling around on it when it is too wet. What is too wet? Here is Dan's test for clay soil workability. Dig out a shovelful of soil, raise it to a height above your knees and slowly turn the shovel upside down. If the soil stays stuck to the shovel blade, forget it! If it hesitates before falling, forget it! If the soil releases from the shovel upon being turned, but does not break apart when hitting the earth, you are close but should probably wait a day or two longer if you can. Obviously the best case would have the soil breaking apart when hitting the ground. That's when you dance happily into the garden trimming, transplanting, and doing other winter chores, ahead of the rain and getting ready for spring.

Garden Journal: Don't have one? The cool months are a good time to start a garden scrapbook (yes, while sipping a mug of hot whatever). Fill it with photos, plant information, date the first Humboldt Lily blossom opened, bird arrivals, strange weather, new gardening books you have read, plants you have killed, those you have revived, recipes involving native plants, and Dan's Soil Test results. It is a useful tool for the garden, but mostly it's a lot of fun. Happy Gardening!