

# Hot August Landscapes

Published in the Davis Enterprise August 2022

It's instructive to travel around Davis neighborhoods during a drought in August. Lots of completely dead lawns, lots of yard conversions to low-water landscapes. The latter is preferable, obviously, but I'm having two problems with all of this.

The first is the collateral damage to woody shrubs and especially trees in the existing landscapes. Your trees need water, and had been gaining much of it from your and your neighbor's lawn watering. A healthy tree is an investment of many years of growth, well worth attending to. I probably don't need to reiterate the environmental and health benefits of trees. If you change over your landscape, please remember to provide for the water needs of the trees.

The second is the rather austere nature of some of these relandscaping projects. Widely spaced desert-looking plants surrounded by bark or, worse, rock. A cityscape dominated by this style will be hotter and drier than a leafier one. So when someone said to me that "it seems we have to choose between summer flowers and water conservation," I felt compelled to prove them wrong.

## **What's wrong with desert landscaping?**

Nothing, for some places and some folks. I grew up with chaparral, spent lots of time in the deserts, and have a great admiration and fondness for many of the plants of the American Southwest. We spent a lot of summers driving around there in cars (without air conditioning), and even before I cared about plants I would marvel at these life forms that could tolerate such heat, aridity, and wind. My mother would have us all drive out to the Anza Borrego Desert State Park a couple of weeks after any heavy rainfall event to see the glorious, sudden bloom of the ocotillos that follows. Our front yard was a cactus garden where I grew up! So I'm okay with all that in some settings.

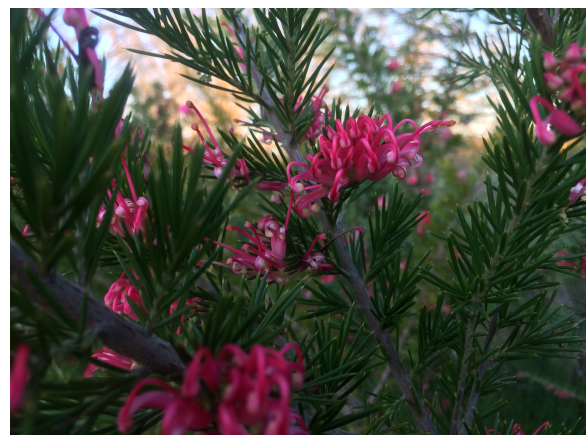
But I just want to stress that it's leafy shrubs, trees, and irrigated landscapes that make our living and gathering spaces more habitable in this hot interior valley where we live. Foliage and flowers make a healthier ecosystem, with beneficial insects, birds and butterflies, lizards, frogs, and toads. Agaves, aloes, mangaves, yuccas, and cactus can be used as strong accents in more open landscapes, but where people gather and sit and want a more comfortable environment, I suggest looking for shrubs and trees that cast more shade and cool the air around them.

I've planted a lot of shrubs over the years to create groupings and islands of vegetation for the purpose of enhancing wildlife on my property. I look for some of these characteristics:

- Blooms over a long season.
- Flowers that provide nectar for bees, butterflies, hummingbirds.
- Flowers that provide exposed pollen for smaller insects (many insects feed on pollen).
- Fruit for someone to eat.
- Mix of foliage textures and branching habits.
- Drought tolerance once established.

Higher water plants that you want to grow can be grouped near the house to provide more cooling into the windows or around where you like to sit. Note: birds and various animals really like these zones.

Our climate has cool, wet winters and hot, dry summers, something we share with certain regions around the world: the Mediterranean, parts of Australia (e.g. *Grevillea*, shown at right) and South Africa, some parts of Asia, and



more, all of which provide important plant species for California landscapes. And along with California native species from similar plant communities as ours, we can borrow from the plant palette of the American Southwest and Mexico. So we have a lot to choose from (<http://redwoodbarn.com/droughttolerant.html>).

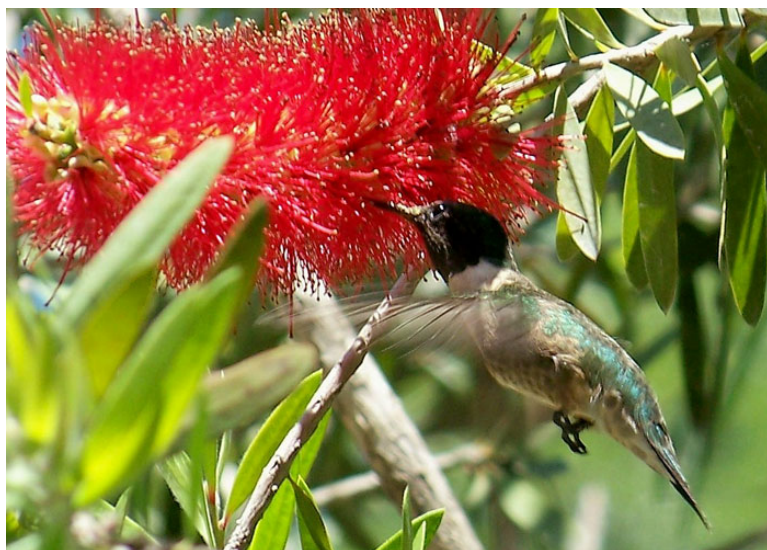
Here are some that meet several of those criteria above, to provide a long season of bloom, attract wildlife, and conserve water. All of these plants can be watered deeply about once a month, once established, for best appearance.



### Taller shrubs:

*Heteromeles arbutifolia*

Toyon (above right). California native with flowers in spring that attract beneficial insects, showy fruit in winter for the birds.



*Callistemon citrinus*  
Bottlebrush (left). Australian shrub with bright red flowers off and on through the year that attract hummingbirds. There are several new

varieties that have more upright or lower growth habits.

### *Xylosma congestum*

This common landscape shrub is very versatile, has shiny, lush foliage despite total drought tolerance. Flowers in late summer are very attractive to bees.

### **Medium height shrubs:**

#### *Leucophyllum frutescens*

Texas ranger (right). Waves of strong pink blooms on bimonthly cycles. Hummingbirds visit the flowers and they are especially attractive to honeybees.

#### *Rosmarinus* Tuscan Blue

Mediterranean native. This upright-growing variety of the common rosemary is especially vigorous with dark green foliage and vivid blue flowers. Blooms heavily in winter.

#### *Salvias*

The ornamental sages are some of our most adaptable landscape and garden plants. The southwestern varieties have the longest bloom season, with flowers nearly year-around and most heavily in late summer and fall, hence their common name of Autumn sage. Very attractive to hummingbirds and all kinds of bees.



### *Teucrium*

Germanders are adaptable shrubs that are similar to the salvias in their bloom seasons and wildlife benefits. The blue-flowered *Teucrium fruticans* 'Azureum' has especially showy blue flowers.

### *Mahonias*

We have native and introduced species of equal merit. These plants have spiny foliage, which makes them preferred cover for songbirds.

Yellow flowers are showy in winter, steely-blue berries in summer attract birds. Great for shady

areas. Taxonomists have moved these plants to the genus *Berberis*, better known as barberries. *Mahonia lomariifolia* is shown above.



### **Spreading shrubs:**

#### *Ceanothus* Yankee Point

This is one of the few varieties of California lilac that seems to be long-lived and adaptable in the interior. Abundant lavender flowers in spring are very attractive to bees and other insects. Small fruit (not very visible to us) attract songbirds. Provides great cover for wildlife.

#### *Ribes viburnifolium*

Catalina perfume (right, next page). Despite its coastal origins, this evergreen member of the ornamental currant group grows very well in the Valley. It's a shade-tolerant spreading shrub with tiny red flowers in

late winter that are highly attractive to hummingbirds. Excellent ground cover for dry shady areas.

### *Rosmarinus Irene*

Like Tuscan Blue, Irene rosemary has very showy blue flowers in winter, but the growth habit is horizontal.



### **Low growing shrubs:**

#### *Cistus*

A large group of Mediterranean shrubs, all with showy flowers that have large papery petals which sort of resemble roses so they are called rockrose. Ranging from 2 to 5 feet tall and most spreading more widely, they mix especially well with California natives. Flowers attract bees.

#### *Nepeta*

Catnip is the best-known Nepeta, but its cousins the catmints are more useful landscape plants. They make tight, low-growing shrubs about a foot tall and 3 feet across. Blooms continue spring through fall. Their density smothers weeds.

#### *Russelia*

Odd-looking wiry stems and narrow leaves make a mounding mop of a plant, which then startles you with bursts of red tubular flowers (there's also a yellow version); hence the common name of Firecracker plant. Hummingbirds and carpenter bees visit the flowers. After the plant has filled in for a year or so it's quite showy. Native to Mexico and Guatemala, but cold hardy here.

**Perennials:***Gazanias*

These South African daisies bloom from fall through spring, often continuing into summer. Daisies of all kinds attract hummingbirds and bees of all types.

*Epilobiums*

Formerly *Zauschneria*, commonly called California fuchsia, this is a favorite California native flower for the late summer and fall blooms. The bright orange-red tubular flowers are favorites of hummingbirds. There are now pink and white varieties as well. Great for the edge of the border to trail out over a path or around rocks.

**Ground covers:***Myoporum parvifolium*

Australian ground cover that has proven very resilient in dry landscapes in California. Hugs the ground with dense, shiny green foliage. Very attractive to bees. There are white and pink flowered forms. This makes a great flat ground cover where you want the visual effect of a lawn (open, green, clean), though it's too woody for foot traffic.

*Dymondia margaretae*

South African daisy with silvery-gray foliage that makes a dense mat. Small yellow flowers are a nice bonus. This is becoming a top choice of landscapers in the area and has proven successful where irrigation is gradually reduced as it gets established.

**Ornamental grasses:***Muhlenbergia rigens*

Deer grass is one of the few California native plants that is actually native here (most of the popular natives are from the hillier sides of the Valley, or from the coast). Big, tough, dramatic, and evergreen. Grasses

are often planted in masses, but in my opinion deer grass looks best if each plant is given at least a few feet of space.

Don Shor Redwood Barn Nursery <http://redwoodbarn.com>.