

Fall is for Planting

Wrapping up the summer vegetable season

Most people reported good yields of tomatoes this year.

Our biggest factor in total yield is the daily high temperature. When it's above about 90 degrees (F), tomato flowers of most varieties fail to pollinate. Even after pollination, the pollen grains will fail to germinate above 100F. A hot summer reduces yields.

The first week of October notwithstanding, 2026 was a mild summer on our side of the Sacramento Valley. Over the last 40 years we've averaged about 11 days over 100 degrees. May through September this year we had 7 days over 100. Most notable is that on half of our days in June and July, which is the peak period of tomato flowering and fruit set, daytime highs were in the 80s.

Good weather led to good numbers of fruit. Most of the problems we saw as the season progressed were related to insufficient depth of irrigation, raised planter beds needing supplemental nitrogen, and occasional problems with late blight disease and tomato russet mite.

Fruit counts

Each month I do a rough tomato count of developing and ripe fruit. There were some clear winners and a few surprises this year.

- The Girls, as I took to calling them, won the season. Early Girl and New Girl yielded very heavily and consistently through the season. Each produced 175 – 200 fruit.
- Other high numbers came from Genuwine (100+), Jet Star (100+), Thessaloniki (80+), Yellow Furry Boar (80+), and Rugby. Honey Delight is a 1 – 2 ounce golden fruit that is very sweet and proved very popular. I stopped counting at 400 fruit. 4th of July, sold for early production, was another steady producer all season on a compact, disease-free plant. I consider it one of the best for early planting.
- A great find was a tomato variety introduced by the University of Hawai'i called Healani. It is strongly determinate, meaning that it grew quickly, set a large crop of fruit early, and then was done. Over about six weeks we picked close to 100 beautiful 6-ounce fruit, very meaty and flavorful. The plant is compact, with dense foliage shading the fruit to prevent sun scald. Then it was done, so it's a great choice for folks who process tomatoes and then want garden space for fall vegetables. I'll definitely grow this one again for further evaluation (thanks, Sue!).

Fall is for planting: vegetables and flowers

There's still plenty of time to plant cool-season vegetables. Of the brassicas, your best bet is to pivot to multi-sprouting or smaller head types of broccoli and cauliflower. Kale, spinach, and Swiss chard can be planted now. Leafy greens go in all through the fall and winter, including lettuce, mustard, pak choi, radicchio, and the bitter greens such as arugula. Garlic is planted now; onion starts become available as young plants in early November.

This is the perfect time to plant biennials and perennials for bloom next year. Foxgloves, hollyhocks, and sweet william (*Dianthus barbatus*) are planted in fall for flowers next spring and summer.

For winter annuals, October and November are great for planting pansies and violas, snapdragons, stock, and cyclamen for winter and spring bloom.

Fall is for planting: native and drought-tolerant plants

The UC Davis Arboretum and local chapters of the California Native Plant Society all host sales at this time of year and have a lot of choices for low-water plants. We have a somewhat limited range of

woody plant species that are truly native to the Davis area. You will achieve greater diversity and have flowers over a longer season if you blend natives from appropriate regions of the state, along with plants from the southwest, the Mediterranean, Australia, South Africa, and other regions with similar climates around the world.

A quick review of our region.

- We are in a Valley Grassland plant community¹. Summers are hot, mitigated by the delta breeze. Winters are cool and wet. Droughts and floods occur in multi-year cycles. Late-season rainfall can lead to crown and root rot.
- Most plants need some supplemental irrigation in summer. But excessive irrigation frequency creates conditions favorable to root and crown rot pathogens. Native and drought tolerant plants need careful irrigation here.
- Soils range from clay loam to sandy loam, mostly draining reasonably well. Soils that are higher in clay content (west and north Davis primarily) can be especially challenging for natives.
- We are rarely deficient in any plant nutrients (except nitrogen for crop plants). Phosphorus is often very high, sometimes excessive for plants from Australia and South Africa. Fertilize lightly, if at all.

What's truly native here?

- Most prevalent would be bunch grasses, reeds, sedges, even cattails. Deer grass (*Muhlenbergia rigens*) is a very successful native grass species.
- We do have spring-flowering annuals flowers and low-growing herbaceous perennials, including poppies, lupines, and milkweed.
- Our native trees are Valley oaks in open areas, riparian trees (willow, cottonwood, box elder, elderberry) along creeks and sloughs, Western sycamore, and Northern California black walnuts. California white alder (*Alnus rhombifolia*) was once planted widely here, but they were all killed by an invasive borer in the 1980s.
- There are almost no native shrubs here.

Regrettably, speaking of invasive borers, most of our native tree species are hosts to the Invasive Shot Hole Borer (ISHB; update here: https://www.davisenterprise.com/features/don-shor-borers-threatening-urban-forest-get-closer/article_2c187649-85c2-4d83-a5a9-29aa3ae54b43.html). This is a big concern with the Valley oak and sycamore and all of the riparian species.

Native hits and misses

The most popular native shrubs statewide are mostly from coastal areas and the foothills, not the valley floor. Ceanothus and flannel bush (*Fremontodendron*) are beloved for their showy flowers in spring, but they aren't native to our area. Nor are manzanitas, grown for their winter flowers and mahogany-colored bark. Western redbud, native to the foothills, has showy flowers in spring. They can be grown here, but each of these popular natives has issues in our region.

- *Fremontodendron* is very sensitive to root rot and dies even with careful watering here. I haven't seen it successful except in the arboretum. The hairs on the leaves and flowers also cause extreme skin irritation. Not recommended.
- Manzanitas are prone to both crown rot and branch dieback, caused by water molds and fungi. With limited exceptions, they don't live very long here.
- Western redbud (*Cercis occidentalis*) grows and blooms fine, but it can get branch dieback

¹ <https://www.laspilitas.com/nature-of-california/communities/valley-grassland>

when we have late-season rainfall and the leaves get burnt and spotted during periods of high temperatures. Non-native redbuds often have better summer appearance here.

- I have not seen madrone (*Arbutus menziesii*) grow here at all. I recommend the hybrid in the same genus, *Arbutus* x Marina, for the same look.
- The tree form of Ceanothus, Ray Hartman, has not been successful for me and I'm not aware of any established plants locally. I would not rely on that variety here.
- On the plus side, toyon (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*) and coyote brush (*Baccharis pilularis*) are very adaptable shrubs, native to nearby plant communities, that tolerate summer watering.

Ceanothus

I can attest that purple and blue are special colors to gardeners. Blue is often described as the rarest color in nature. While there are white and pink ceanothus varieties, the overwhelming majority of species and varieties in the genus are in “shades of azure, cobalt, indigo, and cerulean.”²

The flowers in late winter and spring are very showy, fragrant, and extremely attractive to pollinators and other insects. The plants provide dense cover for songbirds. What's not to love about this group of plants? Perhaps the high failure rate in Valley landscapes.

Interesting to note that English, French, and Belgian horticulturists took an early fancy to “California lilacs” and began breeding and selecting them many decades ago. Early records show breeding and selection in Europe as early as 1830!

In the mid-20th century, California native plant nurseries selected and introduced many of the named cultivars you find in garden centers now. These are very popular in coastal areas. In the Valley, they can be hit or miss in performance. Articles about ceanothus focus on “longevity” and “garden tolerance,” euphemisms for the high failure rate caused by dense soils and watering too often.

With dozens of ceanothus varieties in the nursery trade, a few stand out.

Yankee Point is a spreading variety that grows to about 3 feet tall by as much as 15 feet across. It has grown well for me in sun, shade, and both with and without irrigation. Skylark, and Valley Violet are relatively compact types which seem to be widely adapted. Others that are often described as “garden tolerant” include Concha, Frosty Blue, and Joyce Coulter. These all spread quite a bit.

Keys to success in our area include:

- Avoid drip irrigation. Water trickling at the crown of the plant invites crown rot.
- Plant them high. The crown of the plant should be an inch or two above the surrounding grade.
- Plan for their spread. Ceanothus do not like to be pruned, especially into hard wood. Pinch green tips to control the growth if necessary. Choose a variety that actually fits in your yard: many spread 10 to 20 feet or more!
- Water thoroughly every week or so during the first couple of summers, then back off. A very deep soaking once a month should be adequate thereafter.
- Be flexible. I've had ceanothus plants provide glorious bloom for 7 to 10 years, and then abruptly die.

As Lee Burkhill, a UK landscape designer and BBC garden commentator, says, “Ceanothus is a short-lived shrub. It is, in horticultural terms, what we sometimes call a 'live fast, die young' plant.”

UC Davis Arboretum sales: October 31 and November 14.

California Native Plant Society, Sacramento chapter sale information here:

<https://sacvalleynps.org/plant-sales/>



Cyclamen, dwarf

A tuber-forming perennial that is usually grown as a winter annual, cyclamen thrives and blooms in cool weather and is not harmed by frost here.



Deer grass, *Muhlenbergia rigens*, is a native grass that makes large, dramatic clumps. It can grow in full sun with limited irrigation, and has also worked for me in partial shade.



Grevillea Pink Pearl

Mixing woody plants from similar climates can give us more species diversity and longer bloom season. Grevillea Pink Pearl, a hybrid grevillea from Australia, has flowers year-around with heavy bloom mid-winter. It is very attractive to hummingbirds and can tolerate drought.



Heteromeles arbutifolia Davis Gold

Toyon is one of our most adaptable native shrubs for landscapes. It grows upright to 10 feet or more tall, then broad. Winter fruit is usually red, but a yellow-fruited variety sold as Davis Gold came from the UC Davis Arboretum many years ago. Birds enjoy the fruit in the late winter.



Heteromeles flowers

Toyon is not noted for showy flowers, but they do attract pollinators and many other beneficial insects. Toyon shrubs also provide good cover for songbirds.



Ceanothus Frosty Blue

The genus *Ceanothus*, commonly called wild lilac or California lilac, includes dozens of species and a couple of hundred varieties. Known to be persnickety about soil drainage, and often described as “short-lived.” With careful attention to variety selection and summer irrigation, they can give showy flowers for several years. Shown here is Frosty Blue, which grows to 10-feet tall with potential 15-foot spread.