

Gardening wild

Once again, I see a tuft of a tail disappear around the corner of a shrubbery, so swiftly and gracefully that even my sharp-eyed cattle dog doesn't notice it.

I always check which way the tail is, up or down. I am told that a coyote runs with its tail down, while a fox runs with its tail straight out. Foxes are fine. If it's a coyote, the dog needs to stay closer.

Foxes have been living on my property for a couple of decades now, enriching the night sounds with their strange yelps and doing these funny vanishing acts when we walk nearby. Their dens are amazingly well hidden, but invariably are somewhere deep inside an overgrown thicket of prickly plants. Right now, it's a hedge of grevilleas and callistemon, but in the past they've inhabited a mélange of berry canes and suckering wild roses, or a pile of prunings from the thorny trifoliolate orange that I intended to move months prior. Our interactions, mostly at dusk or dawn, are very casual, fleeting, and mutually respectful.

It's an open question whether these are the native Sacramento Valley red fox, or the introduced red foxes, escaped from 19th century fur farms, that predominate in other parts of the Valley. It seems our property is right on the borderline where those populations meet¹. They might even be hybrids. All I know is, if they're eating voles and pocket gophers and ground squirrels, they're fine with me.

The way to get red foxes on your property, if you happen to live out in the country, is to have some thickets. Those are also great habitat for ground birds such as our native quail. And for skunks and opossums. On the plus side, skunks eat snails.

It's surprisingly easy to create a thicket. I've done it several times by accident, usually involving roses and berries, but also bamboo, junipers, compact xylosma, prickly pear, and fruit tree rootstock suckers. Apparently, the spinier, pricklier, and denser, the better. Good rule of thumb: if you wouldn't want to crawl in there, the foxes will be happy.

I am not proposing that you plant thickets in your back yard, just allow a little more wildness in the interest of better ecology. Planting or allowing wild areas encourages natural pest management. You provide habitat, nesting sites, food and water sources, and protective cover to promote higher-order members of the food chain. On a rural property, it can be a hedgerow. In your yard, it can just be a corner where you let things grow naturally, perhaps with a water feature, and make some strategic plant choices for beneficial insects and wildlife.

You can:

- Encourage native, overwintering, reproducing populations of ladybugs (convergent ladybird beetle), which eat aphids.
- Increase populations of leatherwing beetles, which eat aphids.
- Encourage native, ground-dwelling bees for pollination, and help conserve the species.

¹ https://mecu.ucdavis.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/491/2017/11/The-Native-Sacramento-ValleyRedFox_2010.pdf

- Provide habitat for songbirds, some of which feed on garden pests.
- Provide food sources and habitat for the gregarious birds, the scrub jays and mockingbirds, which eat larger insects as part of their diets.
- Provide resting and larval habitat for dragonflies, which eat whiteflies.

It's pretty simple. Birds like a safe place where they can rest, hidden. They like berries and insects to eat, preferably near dense shrubbery. Ladybird beetles benefit from winter moisture on grasses. Ground dwelling bees need open soil, without mulch. Dragonflies like water for their larvae, and the adults like sticks to sit on.

How it works

The leaf-footed bug is an increasing pest in our area. Twenty years ago, I'd see a couple of samples in the summer, whereas now they are brought to me every week from spring through fall. They are in the category of large bugs known as stinkbugs. Squash one and you'll understand the name.

Stinkbugs mostly have broad host ranges (i.e., they attack a lot of kinds of plants). The leaf-footed bug has a powerful proboscis that it pokes into soft fruit such as tomatoes and peaches, as well as soft green almonds and even pomegranates. Pomegranate trees are one of the places you're likeliest to find them. They are a congregating insect, meaning that they gather in groups, especially as the weather cools.

Most of the damage to soft fruit, occurring when the tomatoes and peaches are nearly ripe, is barely noticeable. You may see a slight blemish at the point of the poke. If there are large numbers of them attacking green fruit, the fruit can be unsightly or fail to develop. With pomegranates, they like to suck the juices out of a few of the little red arils inside, and sometimes introduce spoilage organisms into the fruit such that you find the pomegranate rotten inside when you cut it open. Usually the yield of good fruit far exceeds the number of damaged ones.

In a garden with lots of birds, you rarely have a significant problem with these pests. Mockingbirds and scrub jays eat bugs in the summer, in their mixed diets of small fruits and seeds and insects. So, if you have a lot of leaf-footed bugs, try to encourage these larger birds. My small mulberry trees draw the birds to the garden, and then I watch as they move from the mulberries to the nearby tomato vines, ducking in and out as they search for bugs.

What birds want

The key is to provide food sources, such as the mulberries, for the birds, along with some shrubs that are dense enough to provide them with cover. Examples of shrubs that produce berries eaten by birds are mahonias and barberries, native and ornamental currants (*Ribes*), native wild lilacs (*Ceanothus*), even common landscape shrubs such as *Viburnum tinus*. As a bonus, each of these has flowers that attract beneficial insects as well as hummingbirds in some cases.

You also need to be willing to tolerate their slight predation on your fruit, though the blackberries and mulberries the birds prefer are generally so abundant that's not an issue. A

fresh water source is helpful. A nearby drip line can be modified to fill a bird bath or small, shallow pond. Sprinklers are very popular with many types of birds and also attract dragonflies.

Mulching with leaves

The website of Pacific Horticulture magazine has an outstanding resource² for gardeners wishing to encourage native and beneficial insects. They provide insight as to how to encourage the leatherwing beetles³, which are voracious aphid eaters:

“Encouraging a resident population of soldier beetles is easy in gardens. Choose suitable flowers to bloom over a long season. Any habitat garden must include a water source; soldier beetles are particularly known to frequent moist habitats. It is important to the life cycle of soldier beetles (and many other beneficial organisms) that they have undisturbed, mulched soil in which to pupate, so include permanent perennial plantings in gardens. A fragile and important community thrives at the interface between soil and organic matter. In permanent plantings, avoid raking and add organic material to the surface of the beds as needed to keep the soil in good fertility.”

I have always lived with very large shade trees, and we just rake up the leaves in fall and spread them around perennials and shrubs nearby to decompose through the rainy season. This provides for an abundance of leatherwing beetles and eliminates aphids.

The larvae live one to three years, so having some undisturbed areas where leaves and compost are breaking down steadily and continuously is crucial to their lifecycle. This requires some water. In xeric landscapes with underground drip irrigation, provide some areas watered by above-ground micro-sprinklers for sufficient moisture.

Not mulching some areas

Much has been made of the problems faced by European honeybees. But less attention has been paid to our native pollinator species, including bees that live in the ground. While I advocate for mulching to improve the soil, shade roots, and retain soil moisture, some of these ground-dwelling native bee species require open soil areas. Leaving part of your landscape unmulched can be vital to retaining their habitat.

California natives

Having some California native plants in your landscape can encourage specialized pollinators. Many can be touchy about our heavy soil and high summer temperatures. The following California native plant choices are adaptable, can be left unattended, have reasonable drought tolerance, and host insects and birds.

Yankee Point wild lilac (*Ceanothus griseus horizontalis* ‘Yankee Point’). One of the most adaptable of the California wild lilacs. Most flounder in our dense soils and hot climate, but this

² https://www.pacifichorticulture.org/search/garden+allies?post_type=article

³ <https://www.pacifichorticulture.org/articles/soldier-beetles/>

one has proven successful in a wide range of habitats. Spreads several feet, spring blooms attract bees of all kinds, and the small fruit attracts songbirds.

Toyon (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*). Native to the oak woodlands of California, the flowers attract pollinators and beneficials and the berries attract larger birds. One of the most adaptable of our native shrubs.

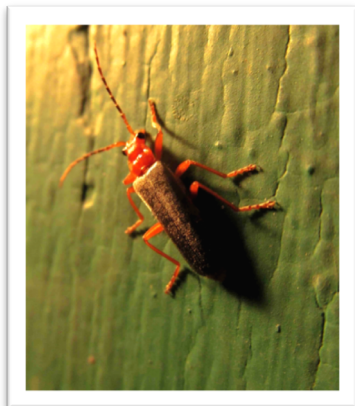
Matilija poppy (*Romneya coulteri*). Southern California native that thrives here. The big fried-egg flowers float atop a vigorous plant which spreads by rhizomes. Scads of pollen, easily accessible, attracts bees of all types.

Elderberry (*Sambucus mexicana*). A great big plant with tropical-looking leaves. Lush when watered, but tolerates drought. Flowers attract beneficials, berries are eaten by all kinds of wildlife and people.

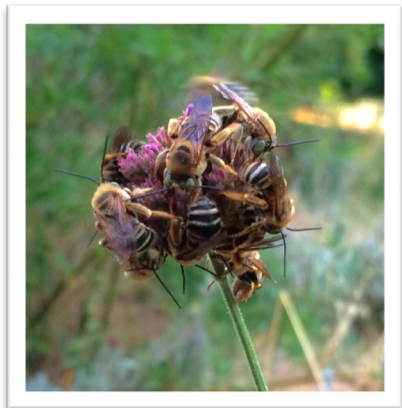
Catalina perfume (*Ribes viburnifolium*). A native low spreader for shade. The tiny flowers attract hummingbirds. Pretty much indestructible.

Sages (*Salvia clevelandii*, *S. sonomensis*, and hybrids). The sages draw large bees and hummingbirds. Our native species mostly bloom in spring, while the southwestern species bloom in summer and fall. I often find all stages of ladybird beetles on my native sages. The California natives need room to spread. Very tolerant of drought and heat.

Willows are great for beneficial insects, as they provide pollen on blooms that come very early. But most of the native species are too big and breakable for a typical yard. Non-native types are more attractive and manageable garden plants. *Salix caprea*, a large shrub commonly called pussy willow, is used in flower arrangements for the interesting fuzzy buds. It grows quite easily. Willows can take poor, wet soils, as well as some drought once established.



One of the best beneficial insects for controlling aphids, the leatherwing beetle (sometimes called soldier beetle), breeds in the moist interface of decomposing organic matter on top of soil. Leaf piles are ideal for encouraging their population.



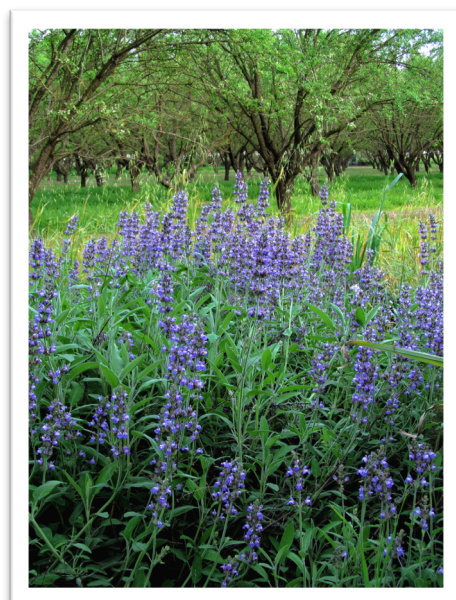
These stingless male digger bees are clustered on the bloom of a Verbena. I've also found them on lavender blossoms, rosemary, Texas ranger, and other low-water plants. The females are in the undisturbed, unmulched bare soil nearby.

Larger birds such as the scrub jays are very helpful in the garden. Their diet includes larger bugs, including the leaf-footed bugs that are increasing in our areas. Encourage jays with shrubs to provide cover, and water sources.



Grevilleas are Australian native shrubs with great drought tolerance, very well adapted to our climate. Some such as Pink Pearl, shown here, get quite large and have prickly needle-like leaves. Foxes have taken up residence deep in my unpruned hedge of this variety. I stopped watering them a couple of decades ago. The flowers in winter and spring attract hummingbirds. There are smaller and less prickly varieties suitable to smaller yards.

Ornamental sages come in all shapes and sizes, with spes native here as well as many from the Southwest. This cultivar of a native species, Dara's Choice, blooms in late spring. The flowers attract hummingbirds, and I often find ladybird beetle larvae on it in late winter.



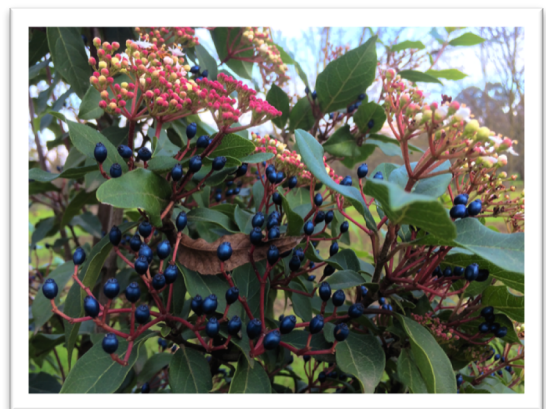


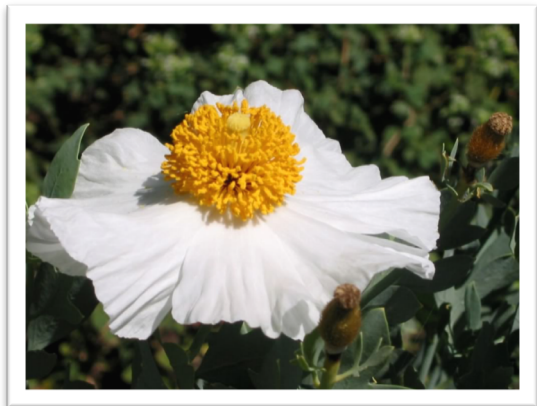
California or wild lilac, the *Ceanothus* species, are popular natives, but they often succumb to root and crown rot. Water carefully. Some varieties, such as Yankee Point, have proven more adaptable. The blooms attract bees of all kinds. The shrubs are dense and provide cover for songbirds, and the late summer berries, barely noticeable to us, attract larger birds.



Easy to see why pollen-eating insects like willow flowers. Allergy sufferers take note of the very high pollen production in late winter. Pollen and nectar that are easily accessible are important food sources for many insects, including some that feed on aphids and other garden pests. Pussy willows are popular for flower arrangements before they bloom, and are extremely easy to root and grow.

Many common landscape shrubs can be dual purpose, providing food sources for birds as well as flowers for us and small insects to enjoy. *Viburnum tinus*, commonly called laurustinus has blooms in winter and spring, followed by steely blue berries that hang on through the summer. It is an easy shrub for hedges and the back of a flower border.





Want a native plant that forms a thicket all on its own? Matilija poppy (*Romneya coulteri*), also called fried-egg flower, spreads by rhizomes quite steadily and can cover quite a large area over time. Bees of all kinds like the flowers.



Our native currants make great additions to an informal hedge or thicket. The flowers draw beneficial insects, and the small fruit attract birds. Most look best with some summer watering, but can tolerate drought. Shown here is *Ribes aureum gracillimus*, the golden currant.

