

Keep It Messy for Nature



Cultivar, Miranda monkeyflower

I grow California native plants for many reasons. The biggest one is that I love California and the plants that evolved here. Who can resist the happy faces of our sticky monkeyflowers (*Diplacus aurantiacus*)? Also, it is nothing less than a miracle that the creamy flowers of California buckwheat (*Eriogonum fasciculatum*) appear in the hottest, driest time of the year.

Camp Native Versus Camp Other

Some might say that this is a frivolous argument at a time when global climate change and mass extinction threaten our very existence. In fact, gardeners who are concerned with environmental issues divide themselves into several factions when it comes to the importance of gardening with native plants. Some advocate growing only local natives, while others prefer a less rigid approach using native plants plus exotic ornamentals. There are even those who believe we can create excellent habitat using plants from anywhere so long as they provide ecological services needed by the animals we wish to attract.

It is unfortunate that people create these divisions. It gets heated and sometimes even mild-mannered gardeners call each other names, claiming that their way is the right way. But as in all things, it is more complicated. How we garden is as important, environmentally speaking, as the

plants we select.

An Unnatural Native Garden

It is actually quite possible to create a most unnatural garden of native plants, a place that is unusable by pollinators, birds and other critters. This hypothetical garden may include a collection of locally native and appropriate plants, but if it is too neat and tidy, neither bird nor lizard can gain purchase. And if we use machinery to maintain it, the place can become inhospitable to all. What lizard can withstand the desiccating breath of the monster leaf blower? Even escaping the vile machine, the dinner choices would be sparse. By removing leaves and organic detritus, the villainous blower leaves little for insects to eat, and no place for them to stay. And, as most of you know: no bugs, no lizards; no bugs, no birds; no bugs, no spiders.

This imaginary native plant garden may be designed as a formal landscape – you know, with geometric grids of live-forever (*Dudleya virens* ssp. *hassei*) or California fescue (*Festuca californica*). When a fallen twig, some leaves, or even the occasional death of a plant breaks the symmetry, the gardener has to take action. The design is preserved over the needs of any garden occupants, save the two-legged ones.

What Does a Lizard Need?



Lizard sunning herself on log

Weeding Wild Suburbia

All About Gardening with California Native Plants

<http://www.weedingwildsuburbia.com>

In order to better understand how to increase available habitat in our urban and suburban places, let's consider what a garden denizen like a lizard wants. For just a moment, visualize yourself as a common western fence lizard. There are four things on your mind. One is avoiding the disastrous fate of becoming a canapé for the resident cat. Second, you must warm yourself up in the mornings and stay cool if the day is hot. Third, you have to eat. And finally, what is life without a family? If you are a male, you need territory and a lookout to find both food and females. As a female you need to be able to find an acceptable mate when the time is right, and a safe place to lay your eggs.



white-lined sphynx moth

Given all of these requirements, you want a place with a bit of mess. It should have rocks and logs where you can catch some rays, look for food, and if you are a male, show off for the ladies. Decomposing logs provide a nice perch and are a place where insects (yummy food) congregate. They also allow you to instantaneously disappear when the hungry cat is on patrol. Furthermore, you blend into the colors of the organic matter that covers the garden floor. What you want, therefore, is a less tidy garden.

A Watchful, Gentle and Messy Gardener

Rather than arguing about the advantages of native versus nonnative plants in the garden, let's take a look around and see what nature really wants. I love native plants, but some nonnatives – so

Weeding Wild Suburbia

All About Gardening with California Native Plants

<http://www.weedingwildsuburbia.com>

long as they are not invasive – may be fine too. More importantly, to invite nature into our gardens we need plants that appeal to pollinators, plants with berries and seeds, and plants that offer cover and perch. Native plants, animals and microorganisms evolved together, and so their relationships have been tested in time. We can learn much from them, but let us remember that it is not just who is in our garden, but how we treat them. I am writing this piece right after New Year's Day, and my 2020 resolution is to be watchful, gentle and messy in my garden. How about you?



Black phoebes enjoy insects in my messy backyard