

Native plants in summer

People new to native plants often express concern about the dreaded dormancy period they are reputed to exhibit in summer. Many tell me that they like native plants but want to have year around color. My reply, *brown is a color*, is usually not appreciated... But it is! Actually, a garden of carefully selected native plants can offer bright flowers, along with comforting greens, and still not break the "water-bank." In this post I'd like to give you a summertime peak at my wild garden containing native and nonnative plants. Yes there are browns and grays, but some yellows, greens, and reds brighten up the yard as well.

The garden in our absence

Before leaving for a reprieve in the [Pacific Northwest](#) in June and July, I set up different irrigation systems for different parts of the yard (see blog posts: Garden care while you travel - [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#)). The front yard vegetable garden was on a timer that controlled a low-volume system. The front lawn received weekly water from conventional overhead rotor and spray irrigation heads. Drip hoses, buried beneath a layer of mulch for mature trees, were manually set off to apply water deeply but infrequently.

I worried through the record-breaking [heatwave in June](#). Fortunately the garden was being watched over by a native plant expert who came by to turn on the spigots for the soaker and drip hoses, returning many hours later to turn them off. He mowed the small patch of lawn, tidied up the yard, and tended plants in need of care.

We returned in early August. The garden not only survived without me, it thrived. The nonnative trees all look good. The coast live oaks, as expected, look great. Yes, I lost a few plants – mostly young ones that were put in to spruce up the garden for the [Theodore Payne Garden Tour](#) in April – but overall, the garden fared very well.

My summer garden

There were big surprises, though! The biggest were the sunflowers that grew to over eight feet in height. They took over the west side of the front yard, shading the vegetable garden. This was probably good for the tomatoes, onions, and peppers because I suspect they would have cooked in the triple digit heatwave without the shade of the sunflowers. Enough sun reached the veggies and we are still harvesting lots of goodies.

The outside of our house was being painted right up until the week before we left. This meant that I wasn't able to set up the irrigation until the very end. In the rush I did not have time to clean up the wildflowers. I kind of like the way they look standing dry and brown with seedheads full of seed, but I can see how others may find this a bit too wild (ie. unkempt). I will be cleaning them up and

collecting more seed in the next few weeks. The biggest challenge, though, will be clearing out the sunflowers. Some have stalks that are three inches in diameter. But I do so love them!

A messy, wild garden

The messiness is to my liking! It is also to the liking of birds, butterflies, lizards, raccoons, squirrels, fig beetles, spiders, and zillions of other insects. Yesterday I spent the morning playing with my grand kids in the back yard. The kids made entrees of mud, herbs and berries which we "ate" with relish. After clearing the dishes, we lay on a blanket watching fig beetles zoom around over head. Occasionally a monarch or a mourning cloak soared above. Yes, green lawn would be softer on their feet, but far, far less interesting!