



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Native Plants and the Vegetable Garden (August 16, 2025)

By Nancy Hawkins, Tulare/Kings Counties Master Gardener

A friend gave me a copy of an article from the LA Times, Sunday, April 13, 2025, titled "Bountiful Veggies or Fragrant Native Plants?" My first response was, "What does vegetable gardening have to do with California native plants?" Plenty, it turns out.

Many gardeners enjoy growing California natives for their low upkeep and benefits to nature. But these same gardeners also plant high-maintenance edible gardens that attract insect pests and sometimes succumb to disease. Edibles require water, time, and chemicals, while native plants would need less care. How can a gardener have both?

If you plant a garden that includes native plants, your fruit trees and annual edible crops will produce more abundantly and have fewer insect and disease problems. Pollinator gardens are planted specifically to attract butterflies and hummingbirds. They also attract native wasps and bees, dragonflies, damselflies, assassin bugs, ladybugs, lacewings, and spiders. Likewise, native plant gardens not specifically intended for pollinators will attract and support many beneficial insects, butterflies, and hummingbirds. Establishing and maintaining patches of native plants near your vegetable garden will provide beneficial insects with food resources plus year-round cover. As a result, populations of these beneficials will increase. These insect populations then help pollinate vegetables and control pest insects detrimental to vegetable plants. Everyone wins!

Choose plants with lots of flowers to plant near your veggies or fruit trees, making sure a few of them are native to our area. Some examples of natives available here include native yarrow (*Achillea*), native buckwheat (*Eriogonum*), Penstemons, and native sages (*Salvia*).

Yarrow is a California native perennial herb, growing up to three feet tall and wide. It is planted in natural landscape gardens, including drought-tolerant and wildlife gardens. It prefers well-drained soil in full sun, but will grow in less ideal conditions. It is used as a companion plant, attracting beneficial insects and repelling some pests. A warning: it can become invasive in a well-watered garden.



California buckwheat is a species of wild buckwheat. Characterized by small, white, and pink flower clusters that give off a cottony effect, this species grows from a patchy mat to a wide shrub, with the flowers turning a rusty color after blooming. Buckwheat is of benefit across its various habitats, providing an important food resource for a diversity of insect and mammal species. It also protects ecosystems in many ways, including erosion control, post-fire mitigation, increased crop yields, and habitat restoration.

Penstemons, or Beardtongues, are native to North America. There are many different species, and the flowers come in many colors. The flower shape is tubular, attracting many pollinators, including hummingbirds and butterflies. Songbirds feast on the seeds in the fall. Penstemons are often used in xeriscape gardening, as many are native to desert areas and quite hardy.

Sages are a large group of ornamental and culinary plants. These plants produce aromatic foliage and attractive flower spikes in colors of purple, blue, red, pink, and white from late spring to fall. They are native to hot, dry climates, heat and drought-tolerant, deer-resistant, and low-maintenance. The tubular flowers, which may bloom for a long time, are a favorite of beneficial insects, butterflies, and hummingbirds.



Benefits of natives

By planting natives next to your vegetables and fruit trees, all will be healthier. Healthy plants not only produce more and higher-quality fruits and vegetables, but they also ward off pests better. Any little thing done to keep the annual vegetable plants healthy during their brief season is worth doing. Much better than reaching for the chemical spray or having to pull out dying plants mid-season. Don't hesitate to start with a small area and add more areas as you see what works and what doesn't.

A watering dilemma

Fruits and vegetables are among the neediest of flora because they require lots of nutrients and water. Most California native plants prefer unamended soils and need little water once established. The regular watering most vegetables and trees need to thrive can be life-endangering to native perennials. One solution is "hydro-zoning", an irrigation practice in which plants are separated by watering needs. Plants with similar water needs are planted together. Vegetable beds would be in one zone, fruit trees on another, and native plants on yet another. The irrigation system is designed to deliver water to each hydro-zone in the appropriate amount and frequency. Drip irrigation systems are readily adaptable to hydro-zoning.

Planting Zones

Let's picture what a veggie/fruit tree/native plant garden would look like. Vegetables and fruit trees are planted in beds, raised beds, or in the ground. The space around or at the end of the beds is planted with native plants. This way, you can enrich the soil and frequently irrigate your fruits and vegetables. The natives grow in the unamended soil they prefer, with reduced frequency and longer duration irrigation. In designing an irrigation system, a separate drip line is spread through each area, one going to the vegetables, another to the fruit trees, and another to the surrounding natives. By choosing the right hose length, number and sizes of emitters, and length of irrigation times, all plants will be properly irrigated. The system is easy to modify as needed.

Vegetable gardening and native plants go well together. You don't have to learn everything right now to be a successful vegetable gardener or a native plant gardener. But when you need help, there are plenty of gardeners who love to teach. Just ask! Try something new!

Are you interested in becoming a Master Gardener? Our next class will begin in January 2026 and run through May 2026, with weekly classes. For more information, visit: <https://ucanr.edu/site/tulare-kings-master-gardeners/become-master-gardener>. If interested, please fill out a survey: <https://surveys.ucanr.edu/survey.cfm?surveynumber=10225>.

Questions? Call the Master Gardeners:

Tulare County: (559) 684-3325, Tues & Thurs, 9:30-11:30;

Kings County: (559) 852-2736, Thursday Only, 9:30-11:30 a.m

Visit our website for past articles, sign up for our e-newsletter, or email us with your questions:

http://ucanr.edu/sites/UC_Master_Gardeners/

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/mgtularekings14/> ; Instagram at: @mgtularekings