

Time for gardens to go native

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After several days without rain, and with the thermometer dancing near 80, I finally surrendered.

My little patch of fescue grass was turning blond. So I turned on the sprinklers long enough for a really good soak.

Every Angeleno knows we're living on water siphoned from other parts of the state. And it feels wrong somehow to drench your lawn in the middle of Southern California winter — even on one of the two allowed watering days.

But it's been another year of paltry precipitation. The rain gauge on my roof has recorded just 4 inches since July. For my lawn, it was a life or death moment.

"There goes another pond in the Owens Valley," I thought as the sprinkler sent a bouquet of water into the air. "Goodbye, little stream in the Sierras."

Afterward, to assuage my guilt, I visited a couple of my water-conscious neighbors in the Arroyo Seco. They're the kind of people who never commit water sins because they plant and care for shrubs, grasses, flowers and trees that require no artificial irrigation.

For them, 4 inches of rain is a deluge. Their secret drought-busting weapon? That vast collection of often underappreciated plants known as California natives.

You see more and more of these odd flora in L.A. yards and gardens. There's California buckwheat, whose dried flowers turn a deep rust color this time of year. And deer grass, small, sphere-shaped clumps that are starting to show up alongside L.A. sidewalks.

They are living things from deep in L.A.'s past and now they are showing us the way to the future.

I've been thinking about going native for a while now. It turns out winter is the best time to get started.

Over at the Audubon Center at Debs Park, a group of local children have been hard at work planting since November. They've been trying to help a small but ancient ecosystem spread on a quarter-acre patch of hillside overlooking the Pasadena Freeway.

Jeffrey Chapman, the center's director, showed me a



BRET HARTMAN For The Times

HOME: Barbara Eisenstein relaxes in her South Pasadena backyard. Natives "feel so much more like home," she said.

number of tiny seedlings, few taller than 6 inches. He rattled off their names, some familiar, some not: purple needlegrass, California sagebrush, manzanita.

"The gophers ate some of the needlegrass, but most of it is still here," he told me, pointing to some rather unassuming tufts that resembled ponytails jutting from the ground.

Nassella pulchra is the state grass of California, though in L.A. it's been slowly crowded out over the centuries by invasive species like Eurasian wild oats.

Not far from the needlegrass seedlings stood a collection of mature California sagebrush, each plant about waist high. That sagebrush has probably inhabited that patch of Earth for centuries, Chapman told me. "What you find here are the little fragments of what used to be here."

In winter, California sagebrush glows an iridescent pastel green. At Debs Park, I found it sheltering purple needlegrass, with gnarly native black walnut trees growing tall nearby. This is more or less the natural landscape the Tongva saw before Europeans set foot here.

"It took a lot of water to create the Southern California we know today," Chapman told me. "But these plants hardly need any."

Planting natives isn't just a matter of nostalgia or even water conservation. It's a good idea because even just one or two native shrubs or trees in a backyard can change the local ecosystem.

"You can get butterflies that sense these plants from miles around," said Travis

Longcore of the Urban Wildlands Group about natives such as monkey flower and California buckwheat. "You could even put a planter box at the top of the ARCO tower downtown and those butterflies would find it."

In Torrance a project to plant buckwheat on the beaches has helped saved the endangered El Segundo blue butterfly. The Urban Wildlands Group began the effort in 2004 by ripping out South African ice plant first introduced by developers.

"That ice plant was like ecological Styrofoam," Longcore said. Yes, it stayed green 12 months a year, but to California birds and butterflies it was "sterile," he said, because the insects that live off the ice plant are native to Africa and don't exist here.

For a couple of centuries now, Angelenos have brought exotic plants to the city to make the dry landscape look more "alive." They've wanted their adopted home to be as green as the places they come from and thought of California — incorrectly — as a place "without seasons."

"It took me a few years to realize the seasons are flipped here," said Longcore, a native of Maine. In the American East, plants go dormant in winter, he said. Here it's the summer that's the harshest season.

The L.A. natural rhythms are subtle — and uniquely Californian. Deer grass is brown in winter and green in summer, but the California sagebrush I'm planting at home this week loses its color in July.

It's our job as modern Cali-

fornians to help bring some of those old, natural rhythms back to life.

Keeping a growing city sustainable in times of ongoing drought makes this back-to-the-future change inevitable. Mid-21st century L.A. will look a lot different.

But you don't have to tear out your whole lawn or all your rosebushes to help get us there.

Over in South Pasadena, Barbara Eisenstein has ripped up about half of the St. Augustine and Bermuda grass that once covered her property. In its place, she's planted fuchsia-flowering gooseberry, wild grapes and toyon bushes, which produce red berries right around Christmas.

Outside her fence, purple three-awn grass and sacaton grass grow by the sidewalk. Next to the perfect emerald carpets of her neighbors' lawns, the brown and olive drab grasses and asymmetrical shrubs look a bit like a wild savanna.

Appreciating the native garden means changing our aesthetic, Eisenstein told me. We have to see our landscape for what it is — not a place for thirsty plants.

"Native plants feel so much more like home," she said. "It's what we are."

Eisenstein's been gardening with native plants for a decade now and you can follow her work on her WildSuburbia blog.

"You have to take time to learn what the sun does," she told me. "You have to take it slow. That's the lesson that gardening is supposed to teach us."

If you want to learn more, you can travel to the Rancho Santa Ana Botanical Garden, or the nursery of native plants at Theodore Payne Foundation in Sun Valley.

Go there and study those tough and thorny plants. Once established, most require zero supplemental watering. If you take one home you'll be helping — one shrub, one clump of grass at a time — to build a city that can take care of itself.

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