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California Native Plants: Easier to Promote than to Propagate©

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Through the years, California's native plants have enjoyed alternating periods of attention and neglect, depending mostly on the current water supply for landscape irrigation. During periods of drought, when reservoir levels are low and it behooves the water industry to promote conservation, there is often a promotional push for plants that require less supplemental water and natives easily step into the limelight. Eventually though, the rains return, along with the old habits of planting and maintaining thirsty exotic plants. It becomes quite easy to forget about all water crises — past, present, and future. This is the fickle nature of promoting a line of plants based principally on water supply emergencies.

There is no disputing that California's native plants are perfectly suited to the climate, weather conditions, soils, and environmental conditions for California gardens. Also, with more than 5,000 taxa, the sheer statistical odds of a few being beautiful are quite high. The fact is, with a nearly 50% endemism rate and a fantastic diversity in geography and climate, California native plants are among the most unique and beautiful in the world. So "promoting" them for garden use should be a no-brainer. Those in the know are continually pitching natives as the appropriate alternative to high-maintenance exotic plants. Native plant landscaping is truly "sustainable" in every sense of the word.

But in the big picture of California horticulture, native plant gardens still fall into a category of a somewhat "boutique" garden. Because of the great abundance of available plant material grown in California, exotic plants still rule the day as the common choice for outdoor decoration. Those gardens are usually not "sustainable" in any sense of the word.

A new line of plants called "California Friendly" is the most recent attempt to promote plants that supposedly use less water than their thirsty counterparts. The problem with this label is that many plants are included that actually need copious amounts of water, especially when they are used in hot inland locations. There is no real definition for a "California Friendly" plant except that the water industry is desirous to work with the horticultural industry to showcase plants that will grow with less irrigation.

Without clear lines defining what is and what is not a "California Friendly" plant, the promotion effort is in the hands of the promoter, thus the plant industry has put forward more than a few taxa that are not really sustainable in California's dry growing conditions and are therefore not (by definition) very "friendly." Meanwhile, native plants are easily defined (native is native) and, being wholly sustainable and suitable for California's conditions, are the "friendliest."

And herein lays the problem. When the easily defined natives get lumped into the wishy-washy line of exotic and so-called "California Friendly" plants, they get lost in the fray, because for the most part, the non-natives are easier to propagate and grow in the nurseries. They are simply more readily available in the trade.

The "California Friendly" plants are promoted in the name of water conservation and many of the "poster-child" selections happen to be California natives. Not only that, but some of the cameo shots (the cover photographs—let's call them yearbook pictures) happen to be of species which are amazingly beautiful and photogenic, and also difficult to grow in nurseries [e.g., *Fremontodendron* (fremontia), *Romneya* (Matilija poppy)].

In those cases, and with water conservation as the driving purpose, the natives are then much easier to promote than to propagate.

What are a couple taxa that have great yearbook pictures, but are a challenge to produce in the nurseries?

***Fremontodendron* spp. and cultivars.**

- Problem: Summertime root rot in containers.
- Cause: *Phytophthora* and *Pythium*.
- Solution: Proper warm-season water management, cool root-balls, fungicides, fully rooted plants by late spring, no summer pruning, shade, dry foliage.

***Romneya coulteri* and *Romneya* 'White Cloud'.**

- Problem: Difficult to propagate, scarce availability of stock.
- Cause: Species plants require seed treatment by fire. 'White Cloud' can only be propagated from root cuttings.
- Solution: specialized propagation in winter. Seed treatment and laborious root cutting harvest to make new plants.

SUMMARY

Propagators should be involved in the promotional efforts of "California Friendly" plants, especially the natives, so water and resource conservation programs do not backfire. The plants have to actually be in the marketplace and not just in brochures, posters, and other promotional materials. Better coordination is needed between the horticultural community and the water agencies who promote drought-tolerant plants for water conservation.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Mike Bone: For the root cuttings coming from the trenches, are you constantly moving your stock block as you remove root cuttings or do you backfill the trenches and replant your motherstock?

Mike Evans: We replant the crowns, but never totally decimate the entire stock bed. We give it 1 year so it can grown back. The crowns will be set aside and planted either in pots or back in the ground right back in the plot, but we can't take root cuttings from there for 2–3 years. This, then, is a rotation plan on the stock bed.

Germain Boivin: What soil mix do you use and do you use any fungicides for *Romneya* and *Fremontodendron*?

Mike Evans: The soil medium is about 80% inorganic materials (vermiculite, perlite, and sand) with 20% coir peat so it drains really well. We dust the root cuttings with sulfur or something like that. The timing for taking cuttings is probably the most important factor for *Romneya*.