

PLANTING UNDER YOUR OAKS

The Sierra Foothill environment would not be the same without its abundant oaks. Sometimes these are taken for granted and there are still areas where most are cleared in preparation for housing or other development. Recently through a new state law has required that counties mitigate for the loss of oaks within proposed new developments. Developers are also required to avoid oaks and protect the remaining trees during development. For many people who have lived in the foothills all their lives this seems strange. To some of them oaks were to be cleared to improve cattle grazing or for vineyards and to provide firewood. Like so many of our resources they were seen as something which would never run out.

The realization that oaks needed special protection and treatment first developed in other areas of California which had earlier felt the pressures of extensive development. Large housing developments have now come to our foothill counties. The California Native Plant Society, California Oak Foundation, California Horticultural Society, the Cooperative Extension and others have worked to educate the public about the values of oaks and their care.

Our most widespread and abundant foothill oak is the blue oak, (*Quercus douglasii*). It takes a beautiful form and can get quite large when not crowded. The interior live oak, (*Quercus wislizenii*), valley oak (*Quercus lobata*), California black oak (*Quercus kelloggii*) and canyon live oak (*Quercus chrysolepis*) are also found in our foothill area. There are still many people who don't distinguish one oak from another or an oak from any other tree. So far the fungus disease called "sudden oak death" has not spread from areas near the coast to our interior oak forests. There are some oak root fungi which can weaken living oaks through causing decay of their heart wood. Summer irrigation near the base of these trees can lead to root and heart wood decay.

People have done many "unfortunate" things to oaks in the past. A few important considerations during construction will allow the trees to survive in good health. Cutting through the roots to install irrigation lines should not be done. Spray from a sprinkler should never hit the trunks of the tree. The grade around the tree should not be changed as this results in the removal or covering of roots. Most of the roots are within a few feet of the surface. The crown of the tree, where the soil line meets the base of the trunk, must be respected. It is particularly important not to disturb the soil within the "drip line" of the tree. The dripline is the extent of the canopy of the tree. The roots of the tree need adequate oxygen, winter rain only, and a thin cover of decomposing leaves.

Neither should there be planting or disturbance within 3 or 4 feet of the trunk of the tree. The area near the base of the tree outward toward the dripline can be covered with rounded river rocks, gravel, or wood chips. This gives an attractive appearance, protects the very sensitive crown of the tree, eliminates any need for water in the area, and prevents root competition. Grass, ivy or other ground covers should not be used within the dripline. Carefully selected plants may be placed out toward the dripline. These plants must tolerate shade and summer drought. Rather than ground covers, consider a sparse planting plan with a few clusters of low growing plants arranged around accent rocks. The area between plants and rocks can be covered with mulch or smaller gravel.

Our foothill oaks are the "signature trees" of the foothills which would not appear the same without them. They provide shade, beauty and important food and other essentials for much of our wildlife. With a bit of planning and care they will continue as an important part of our Mother Lode environment. Some native plants suitable for planting in the outer edges of the dry shade of the oak tree include the following:

Aquilegia formosa - A. pubescens	Columbine
Arctostaphylos spp.	Low-growing Manzanitas
Artemisia spp.	Sagebrush
Berberis aquifolium	Oregon - Grape
Brodiaea spp. and other bulbs	California native bulbs
Chlorogalum pomeridianum	Soap Plant
Ferns: Wood Fern, Sword Fern, Maidenhair Fern	
Heuchera spp.	Alumroot
Iris spp.	Douglas Iris hybrids
Mimulus aurantiacus	Bush Monkeyflower
Nassella pulchra	Purple Needlegrass; also other native grasses
Ribes viburnifolium	Evergreen Currant
Symphoricarpos albus laevigatus	Snowberry

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