

IN CALIFORNIA, SPRING BEGINS WITH THE OCTOBER RAINS

by MaryRuth Casebeer

Except for the higher elevations, California essentially has two main seasons: the wet growing season and the hot resting period. The growing season begins in October or November after the first heavy rains and cooler weather arrive. In this "spring-time", seeds germinate, bulbs and perennials shoot forth new leaves and deciduous plants burst out in bright green foliage.

During the following four or five months, the plants bloom and produce seeds or fruits. When the weather gets unbearably hot, native plants go dormant—some lose their leaves—saving their energy and strength in their roots waiting for the cool weather cycle to reappear.

DECIDUOUS PLANTS

By developing a relationship with each of the deciduous plants, one can capture the exciting changes—from the first buds in spring to the leafless twigs of winter. For optimum success, fall is the ideal time of year to plant the deciduous ones—those that lose all of their colorful leaves in autumn. You will be rewarded many times over by their color, fragrance and beauty.

Some prize deciduous trees and shrubs that might appear unkempt and barren in their dormant period include: big-leaf maple, California buckeye, ninebark, spicebush, redbud, clematis, dogwood, bush poppy, mock orange, service-berry, aspen, wild plum and cherry, western azalea, wild roses, spiraea, snowberry and elderberry, among others.

Additionally, there are deciduous perennials, bulbs and iris that have few or no leaves in their dormant period. Included in this list are: wild-ginger, larkspur, bleeding heart, wallflower, geranium, milkweed, some monkeyflowers, fairy bells, wild iris, leopard lily, columbine, false Solomon's seal, Matilija poppy and many other bulbs and perennials.

SELECTING, PLANTING AND CARING FOR NURSERY-GROWN NATIVE PLANTS

HOW TO CHOOSE: Generally speaking, if you have a choice of several sizes of plants, choose the smaller ones. A plant with excessive top growth might be root-bound.

HOW TO CARE FOR PLANTS IN NURSERY POTS: The best time to plant natives is soon after the first "soaking" fall rain. Sometimes, you may have to care for your plants in the pots for a few weeks after purchase—waiting for the rains. To keep the roots cooler, place all potted plants in half-shade or full shade. (If left in the sun, the black plastic nursery pots absorb heat, producing a high temperature inside that can damage the roots.) However, the nursery potting mix doesn't retain water as well as a native clay soil. Therefore, carefully observe the leafy perennials in pots, and when they start to wilt, water all the native plants in pots.

HOW TO PLANT: Dig a planting hole the same depth as the soil in the pot and about twice the width of the root ball. (Save this soil for planting.) To encourage the roots to penetrate the soil, scratch the sides of the hole with a shovel turned on its edge as to "roughen up" the slick sides of the hole.

After popping the plant out of the container, prune off any roots that have been circling the pot or are beginning to girdle the base of the trunk. Shake and tap out as much of the light-weight, fast-drying nursery potting mix as possible and loosen the root ball.

Using the soil previously removed—with nothing added—fill in around the root ball to the ground level. Firm around the edges and leave no air pockets. While taking care to place the crown of the plant $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch higher than the ground, be sure no roots are exposed. The soil should slope away from the crown and form a shallow basin. To prevent erosion, mulch the plant to within 3 inches of its central trunk or stem.

The first couple of years after planting protect the young plants from deer browsing by enclosing them in a wire cage.

POST-PLANTING CULTURE: This is the time to become familiar with each of the new plants observing them closely every week or so. At intervals during the winter, especially following heavy rains, check the plants to see if any of the planting basins have standing water. If so, drain the water away from the crown and re-shape the basin.

Conversely, if there is little or no winter rain, soak the plants thoroughly every two to three weeks. In the following spring and summer, deep water every three or four weeks. After the first summer, the plants are on their own! (These summer watering instructions apply **only** to those plants that were new to the garden the previous fall.) Watch for, and fill in, any gopher or mole tunnels you find in the root zones of the new plantings. Often, even if the root is not eaten, the tunnels can create damaging air pockets that can dry out the roots and cause wilt.