

Planting Native Plants and Pollinators

Everyone is talking about native plants and pollinators. Why are these plants important and how do I know what to plant?

What are native plants?

Native plants are plants indigenous to a given area in geologic time. They include trees, flowers, grasses and other plants that have developed, occur naturally, or existed for many years in an area.

Why are native plants desirable?

Natives are generally not invasive and will live in harmony with other plants. They are also generally more disease resistant and reduce the need for pesticides. Most importantly, they generally provide the most nutritious source of food (nectar, pollen, leaves) for animals like butterflies, insects and birds in that specific area. They are the ecological basis upon which life depends, including birds and people. Without them and the insects that co-evolved with them, local birds cannot survive. For example, research by the entomologist Doug Tallamy has shown that native oak trees support over 500 species of caterpillars whereas ginkgos, a commonly planted landscape tree from Asia, host only 5 species of caterpillars. When it takes over 6,000 caterpillars to raise one brood of chickadees, that is a significant difference.

How do I know if something is a native plant?

There are many user-friendly sources for this information:

- www.audubon.org/native-plants provides photos of native plants in your zip code and the specific birds they attract;
- The National Wildlife Federation ranks native plants in your area by the number of butterfly and moth species that use them as hosts at www.nwf.org/nativeplantfinder/about
- Visit the California Native Plant Society website at www.calscape.org.
- Take a visit to the UC Berkeley Botanic Gardens where you will find the largest collection of California native plants in the country.