“CAST-IRON” PLANTS
Adaptable Ornamentals for Central Valley Gardens
Ellen Zagory, Director of Horticulture, and Warren G. Roberts, Superintendent

YEAR-ROUND VALLEY GARDENING

Gardeners moving to the Central Valley of California, especially those from “back east” states with continental climates and summer rain, find themselves confronted with an entirely new set of options for creating a garden. New Valley gardeners discover quickly that we can garden twelve months of the year. Colorful shrubs like winged euonymus and ornamental grasses add a long fall season of interest to the garden. In addition, winters in the Central Valley are mild enough to grow cool season annuals like sweet peas, pansies, larkspurs, poppies and lupines and winter vegetables like kale, Swiss chard and lettuce.

Summer dormant perennial plants, like Alstroemeria, add to the fall and winter garden when they leaf out at the first sign of cooler weather and short days. Many bulbs have leaves emerging in the fall and early winter and blooms starting in February and continuing through March and April. Freesias, daffodils and irises are vigorous in our climate and naturalize to return year after year. In shady areas, cyclamen, summer snowflake (Leucojum aestivum) and Spanish squill (Hyacinthoides hispanica) are reliable winter features that reward with spring bloom.

Summer gardening brings the challenge of dry heat, wind and high light intensity. Plants with small leaves, succulents, and spiky plants like yuccas and agaves have leaves adapted to low humidity and high solar radiation. “Sculptural” plants like coral yucca (Hesperaloe parviflora) can be placed to create focal points and winter structure.

What about herbaceous perennials—plants that die to the ground in the winter? Adapted to evade freezing winters, here in the Central Valley these plants die to the ground or to a small mat and can cause our gardens to “disappear” in winter. For the twelve-month gardener they need to be combined with evergreen, structural plants.
RIGHT PLANT, RIGHT PLACE

Probably the hardest part of gardening anywhere is knowing exactly what plant will do well in which environmental conditions. Some plants prefer sun, others shade. With an understanding of the orientation of the garden to the four points of the compass you can take advantage of microclimates around buildings. Morning sun is the coolest sunshine and is gentle on plants. Eastern exposure is a good location for delicate plants that burn in our hot summer afternoon sun. Southern and western exposures, where a plant gets sunshine in the middle of the day in summer, are suitable for only the toughest plants, but a strategically placed tree can provide a respite in mid-day and expand your plant choices.

If you like to grow tender plants in containers, take advantage of overhangs and south walls to extend the growing season. Your tender container plants will only need to come inside in the coldest, freezing weather.

Some gardeners are uncertain about the trend toward low-water-use landscape designs using California natives and other drought tolerant plants. Will a favorite garden plant be adaptable enough to tolerate these conditions? One strategy is to organize your garden by “hydrozones,” with the moisture-loving plants close to the patio, deck, or wherever you are most active. Then you can place low-water plants, and irrigate infrequently, in the areas farthest from activity along the perimeter of the garden.

TOUGH, ADAPTABLE TREES

People who grew up with New England autumn color yearn to grow maples and birches to capture and enjoy the colorful fall season. One maple that tolerates our water quality and soil condition and still produces good fall color is Acer truncatum, the purpleblow maple. For orange lovers, the calamondin, x Citrofortunella microcarpa, is a tough plant with beautiful little orange fruits, good for their lime-like juice or for making jams and jellies. For smaller yards that require small trees, the Washington hawthorn, Crataegus phaenopyrum, is a tough plant with beautiful orange-red fruit in autumn and winter. The beautiful and dependable crape myrtle, Lagerstroemia indica, is another excellent choice.

For large shade trees, consider the deciduous Kentucky coffee tree, Gymnocladus dioica, or the giant valley oak, Quercus lobata. A little water to get them established and occasional summer irrigation is all they need. For lawn areas, a large tree that will absorb air pollution, cool the air, provide shade and increase your property values is the chinquapin oak, Quercus muehlenbergii, a fountain-shaped tree similar to our lost American elms.

PLANTS THAT ADAPT TO SUN OR HIGH SHADE

Under tall deciduous trees there is a special environmental condition referred to as “high shade.” This allows light to plantings but it is mostly indirect, re-radiated and reflected light that does not heat up the plant foliage as intensely as direct sunlight. Some plants are amazingly adaptable and can tolerate either high shade or direct sun, as long as they have adequate soil moisture. Deer grass, Muhlenbergia rigens, is an adaptable native grass that is tough in full sun, yet still makes a visual statement in partial shade. Ornamental quince is another tough and adaptable plant that flowers best in full sun but will also tolerate part shade. January flowers to decorate your table at Chinese New Year are the reward for growing this plant.

SPIKY PLANTS AND GRASSES

We are very lucky in the Central Valley that we can grow many spiky and architectural plants that provide evergreen forms for the winter garden season. Agaves, nolinas and yuccas are well-adapted to dry heat, and many will also tolerate winter moisture in heavy soils. Agave parryi var. huachucensis is one favorite, resembling a cabbage in its rounded form and leaves. Yucca filamentosa is also hardy, although its tolerance of clay soils still remains to be tested.

Some of the easiest and most adaptable ornamental grasses are Miscanthus sinensis, or eulalia grass, now available in dwarf forms that allow them to fit in today’s smaller gardens. Some Pennisetum forms are beautiful over a long season. P. orientale is one of our favorites, with spring and summer flowers into fall for three seasons of interest. P. alopecuroides ‘Hameln’ has done well on the Arboretum banks and combines beautifully with Sedum ‘Autumn Joy’. Avoid the invasive Pennisetum setaceum.

FIND THESE PLANTS AT ARBORETUM SALES

Many of these adaptable plants will be available at the members-only Spring Plant Sale and Social on March 12, as well as Arboretum plant sales on April 2, April 23, and May 14. All sales take place at the Orchard Park Nursery from 9:00 am to 1:00 pm. Bring your membership card for the 10% member discount. Anyone may join at the door.
CAST-IRON PLANTS FOR THE CENTRAL VALLEY
These plants will tolerate a wide range of garden conditions

PLANTS FOR SUN OR PARTIAL SHADE

Muhlenbergia rigens
deer grass
Nandina domestica
heavenly-bamboo
Zephyranthes candida
Argentine zephyr lily
Muhlenbergia dubia
Liriope muscari and cvs.
Ophiopogon japonicus and cvs.
Ophiopogon planiscapus ‘Nigrescens’

PLANTS FOR SHADE

(Will tolerate morning sun with afternoon shade)

Shrubs
Brunfelsia pauciflora cvs.
Buxus microphylla and cvs.
Calycanthus occidentalis
Camellia sasanqua
Cocculus laurifolius
Japanese boxwood
Nandina domestica and cvs.
Osmanthus ×fortunei
Ribes viburnifolium
Australian bluebell creeper
Sarcococca hookeriana var. humilis

Perennials
Ajuga reptans ‘Catlin’s Giant’
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Arrhenatherum elatius subsp.
bulbosum ‘Variegatum’
Bergenia crassifolia
Buxus microphylla
Carex flaccida (syn. C. glauca)
Carex oshimensis ‘Variegata’
Carex testacea
Carex tunicatula
Ceratostigma plumbaginoides
Cytisus x falcatum
ERigeron karvinskianus
Festuca glauca
Geranium × cantabrigiense ‘Biokovo’
Helleborus argutifolius
Helleborus foetidus
Heuchera ‘Canyon Pink’
Heuchera maxima
Lamium maculatum cvs.
Leucojum aestivum

Plants for Shade

yesterday-today-and-tomorrow
Japanese boxwood
western spicebush
sasanqua camellia
laurel-leaf moonseed
Japanese aralia
heavenly-bamboo
tea-olive
hybrid tea olive
evergreen currant
Australian bluebell creeper
dwarf sweet box

Liriope spicata and cvs.
Liriope spicata and cvs.
Ophiopogon japonicus and cvs.
Ophiopogon planiscapus ‘Nigrescens’

Plants for Shade

(Will tolerate morning sun with afternoon shade)

Shrubs
Ceratostigma griffithii
Hibiscus syriacus ‘Helene’
Lagerstroemia indica hybrids and cvs.
Jasminum nudiflorum
Lonicera standishii
daphne honeysuckle
Rhus typhina ‘Laciniata’
lace-leaf staghorn sumac
ericaceae
Ribes aureum var. aureum
dwarf forms
Salvia greggii and hybrids

TOUGH AND ADAPTABLE TREES

Abies nordmanniana
Nordmann fir
evergreen shrub
Acer buergerianum
trident maple
Acer truncatum
crape-myrtle
Cedrus deodara × Citrofortunella microcarpa
calamondin
Crataegus phaenopyrum
Washington hawthorn
Crimodendron patagia
Chinese bald-cypress
Cupressus sempervirens
Italian cypress
Diospyros
persimmon
Glyptostrobus pensilis
Chinese bald-cypress
Gymnocaladus dioica
Kentucky coffee-tree
Koelreuteria elegans subsp. formosana
Formosan flame tree
Lagerstroemia hybrids, tree forms
crape myrtle
‘Malus ‘Snowdrift’, ‘Spring Snow’
crabapple
Pinus canariensis
Canary Island pine
talus
Quercus lobata
evlin oak
Quercus virginiana
southern live oak
Quercus muehlenbergii
chinquapin oak
Tilia cordata
little-leaf linden