





“Meandering dusty trails with golden hay straw crunching delicately under foot...”

**t**he late afternoon light begins to cast long shadows and amber rays, illuminating the plants and wildlife it graces with a magical glow. There’s no denying it – fall on the Central Coast has arrived: a time for romance, reflection, and enjoying the outdoors in the still warm days and cool evenings.

As fall beckons us to enjoy the grand garden around us, it also invites us to venture back into our home gardens with fresh perspectives. And this time of year is unquestionably the best for planting in our climate. Temperatures are cooling, but soils are still warm enough for root development. Highly-anticipated winter rains will be perfect for plant establishment. Thankfully, task-heavy maintenance activities such as weeding, mowing, and pruning decrease, lending extra time to reflect on what performed well in your garden last season, what did not, and what interesting new plants you should add during the best planting period. As my former horticulture professor encouraged, when adding new plants in the garden, it is important to view the garden as a whole, like an essay. Sometimes major “editing” is necessary to clear out tired perennials and senescent sub-shrubs and begin with fresh plant materials.

Choosing the right plants for this exceptional environment, however, can be a challenge. Our deep seasonal epochs of warm, dry months, followed by cool, wet winters, definitive of our Mediterranean climate, create a very unique floristic province. Luckily, we have a great model to guide us: nature. Consider your next hike or nature walk to be a stroll through a giant showroom of plants perfectly suited to thrive in your own garden. For instance, a hike up one of our local geological gems, such as San Luis Mountain, Bishop’s Peak, or La Cuesta Grade offers an imposing perspective of our native flora thriving, even during this dry time of year. Meandering dusty trails with golden hay straw crunching delicately under foot reveals plants that have not only survived, but are blooming.

Each year, our native flora flourishes, surviving summer droughts and breaking through the dry soil, making fall in this region especially spectacular. Though visitors from the East Coast



may comment on our lack of seasonality, a closer look at California's Central Coast will reveal our own dramatic autumnal show. While in the east, leaves stunningly change color as their chlorophyll breaks down to unmask brilliant reds, oranges and yellows, here, the rusty, gold-colored falling leaves near our rivers and streams reveal the flecked, white bark of our native Sycamore. Note the bright, lemon-yellow Big-Leaf Maples, Willows and Dogwood as they light up the fall sky. As you appreciate the masterful landscaping of our region, remember that you can bolster your own garden with these same resilient gems . . .

Cal Poly's Learning Pine  
Arboretum, San Luis Obispo.

On warm afternoons you can catch the scent of straw and warm maple syrup from the late-blooming **Pearly Everlasting** (*Gnaphalium californicum*) and the dormant **Purple needle grass** (*Nassella pulchra*), our state grass.



One of my favorite rugged plant veterans, the **California fuchsia** (*Epilobium californicum*), explodes with brilliant firecracker-red flowers after the Fourth of July, seemingly saluting our nation, and continues until Halloween.



Our endearing **Hollywood** (*Heteromeles californica*) can produce a sweet-pungent, skunky stink on a warm south-slope, while the **Wild Rose** (*Rosa californica*), above, by contrast, can delicately perfume an entire moist canyon. Both of these native plants produce bright red berries.

Empower and invigorate your own garden with these time-tested, nature-approved species, which are available at local specialty nurseries that support California native plants. As you incorporate them, remember these tenets of good design: colors, texture, bones, form, function, repetition, rhythm. Solid design is primary in achieving a connecting "feel" in a garden. For new gardens, a master plan is essential.

The rains will be here soon enough, so, whether you experience the fall on the Central Coast in your yard with a shovel or in the wild with a walking stick in hand, make the best of the season and get outside, garden, exercise and join the floristic gems.

