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# Stay True to Your Roots

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Walking along the Central Coast bluffs late last summer, I gazed lazily at the effects of the warm winds on the landscape: the hypnotic waves of undulation; the acoustic clap of tall, rustic cattail tussocks (*Typha*



*latifolia*); and the gentle rattle of tall native reeds, rushes (*Juncus patens*), and grasses. Mesmerized, I watched the native grasses swaying headlong with flower spikes extended, the stiff inflorescence appearing to direct the movement like an orchestra conductor's baton. The amber and buff dormant native grass meadows and coastal prairies meandered through the lowland and valleys in a painterly flow. The dry late-summer air smelled strongly of native purple needle grass (*Nassella pulchra*), swirled with warm maple syrup strands from the pearly everlasting (*Gnaphalium californicum*). Sadly, less than five percent of California's native grasslands exist as a result of habitat displacement and development.

Most contemplation of grass in this day and age is limited to lawn and sports fields. Yet, intriguingly, humans have been integrating grasses into the very fiber of their lives and cultures from the beginning of time: construction with bamboo; reeds for roof thatching; wispy grasses and roots for baskets; and sustenance from cereals (wheat, corn, barley, rye, and oats), sugarcane, sorghum, coconut (palm), and molasses. Even meat-eaters rely on the livestock that graze primarily on grasses. Grasses also possess an advanced metabolism that creates more productive carbohydrates (via photosynthesis) than other types of plants under heat and drought stress—making them the perfect low-maintenance addition to your landscape.

There are now several native, wild selections and cultivated varieties of grasses to use in your garden as a result of years of passionate native plant enthusiasts' and horticulturists' work—plant people dedicated to offering the public useful native plants. We are rewarded by their efforts with a vast variety of colors and combinations to choose from in the nursery trade. To honor these hard-working horticulturists, support your local native-stocked nursery by purchasing and planting some California heritage grasses.

Be bold and rip up your conventional turf grass and plant an alternative lawn meadow with clustered field sedge (*Carex praeegracilis*) or blue gramma grass (*Bouteloua gracilis*)—bunch grasses planted en-

masse. Screen unwanted views with large-specimen native grasses, or simply use a single grass specimen as a focal point. There are endless tasteful designs and functional applications of native grasses as well; the most poignant being that native grasses are the ultimate subject to add dramatic movement and grace in the garden—assuming a dependable breeze blows through.

Lead your neighborhood in progressive planting with brilliant masses of Glaucus powder-blue in the forms of creeping fescue (*Festuca rubra* 'Jughandle') and of stiff vertical blue wild rye (*Leymus condensatus* 'Canyon Prince') and blue rush (*Juncus patens* 'Blue'). Add vertical exclaiming spikes to draw attention with deer grass (*Muhlenbergia rigens*); clump small firecracker-flowering tufts in partial shade with tufted hair grass (*Deschampsia cespitosa*); and accompany boulder archipelagos with groupings of Cape Mendocino reed grass (*Calamagrostis foliosa*). Remember, native grasses need regular watering to initially establish; however, in time, they will require far less water than a conventional turf grass.

Take a walk in the tall hay today and celebrate our state's precious grasslands by planting California native grasses in your garden. **CCM**

Todd M. Davidson owns Sage Ecological Landscapes [www.sagelandscape.net](http://www.sagelandscape.net)

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