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Wild Things: Propagating Lesser-Known California Natives©

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INTRODUCTION

It has taken many years and it has involved several false starts, but California's native plants are finally joining the horticultural mainstream. The process began long ago with a few trees, mostly oaks, pines, and redwoods, and two shrubby genera, *Arctostaphylos* and *Ceanothus*. Recently it has encompassed a much wider range of plant genera and even plant types, including a number of herbaceous perennials and even a few bulbs.

Those of us who would like to take part in this evolving market will encounter a new set of interesting challenges for nursery culture and propagation, calling for a combination of creative thought, careful observation, and patient experimentation. The novel factors have to do with the plants' adaptations to an almost overwhelmingly wide range of natural conditions, all of them distinct from those of more familiar ornamentals.

First, there's geography: our state spans several hundred miles, with a dramatic increase in precipitation as one moves from south to north. Elevations range from below sea level to over 14,000 ft, crossing several climate zones, while the effects of mountains and valleys, coastal bluffs and plains create an almost overwhelming array of distinct plant habitats. Overlaid on these features of the land is a Mediterranean climate pattern, generally distinguished by cool, moist winters and warm, dry summers. And there's more — most notably the historic role of periodic fires in renewing natural communities.

Among the resulting plant adaptations, there are several of special interest to propagators. These include seasons of peak activity that are sometimes nearly opposite to those of more familiar Asian and Eastern American plants. Some species, notably bulbous and cormous perennials, even exhibit non-negotiable summer dormancies, brought on by warming temperatures, drought, or both. Many of the mountain dwellers have both cold-stimulated dormancies and specific cold requirements for the germination of seeds and they often show a marked intolerance to winter moisture. Coastal natives, on the other hand, are often more adaptable and opportunistic, maintaining active growth year-round in cultivation. For many plants of fire-renewed communities, there are hard, dense seed coats that need physical or chemical abrasion to permit absorption of water. And there are the quirks of individual plant species, all to be discovered one by one. Dealing with these as propagators involves building some interesting bags of tricks. In our case these range from the planting of seeds and cuttings in an open shade house during fall and winter to the use of solvents to dissolve waxes in the seed coats of some species of the fire chaparral. One of our more exotic tools, also for plants from the fire chaparral, has been soaking the seeds in a commercial smoke extract, coated on disks of filter paper and available from Kirstenbosch Botanic Gardens or a company called FineBushPeople in South Africa.