



CASA  'LA PAZ'

SAGE ADVICE...

SHORT DAYS IN THE NATIVE GARDEN

**Thanksgiving time... You may have noticed by now that the sun's arc is much lower in the sky than it was, say, at... Fourth of July time. Winter (as it were) is upon us. Here are a few things you can be thinking about and doing in your garden during the short days of Fall approaching Winter...**

### TREE PRUNING

Thin a few branches and direct the growth up and out. Allow more sunlight through. If two branches are heading in the same parallel direction, choose one and remove the other. Branches growing down tend to add unnecessary weight. Remove them to strengthen the healthy supporting branch. In the center of the tree, you can thin the crossing branches to open up the crown. Any dead wood should be removed. If disease is a concern, you should sanitize the pruning tools with a 10% solution of bleach in water. Don't cut branches off flush with their connecting branch and don't leave a big stub either. Depending on the size of the branch you are removing, you should leave a quarter inch or so (more of very large branches) to allow proper healing. Tree sealing compounds (i.e.; tree tar) are generally not needed in our climate zone.

### SHRUB PRUNING

Follow the same rules as for trees. A few native shrubs, especially *Ceanothus* also benefit from some tip pruning. In most cases, a formal hedge will not fit into the California native garden theme, but since many of these plants are browse for deer, they are quite well adapted to seasonal pruning. They will live longer and healthier if you head them back at this time of year. You will also see more flowers next spring as



*Fall color in the San Juan Creek*

a result. As a general rule, you can trim off about half of the most recent season's tip growth.

### CULTIVATING

If your ground is hard and compacted after months of maintenance-free native plant gardening, now would be a good time to scratch away at the surface with a three-prong cultivator. (This is also good for the abs, and more therapeutic than any workout in a gym.) You don't need to go very deep, an inch or so will do. This will aerate the soil and prepare it to absorb the winter rains.

### FEEDING

Plants grow and maintain their vigor by finding nutrients in the soil. Native plants are especially good at this when they are planted in their native land, and presumably native topsoil. If your plants are growing on a manufactured slope, or graded land, it is likely that there is no real topsoil, so supplemental feeding is very important. Since most California natives are cool-season growers, they should get their first shot of plant food in the fall.

Healthy soils support healthy plants, so in feeding the plants, you must take care to not ruin the soil. For native

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plant landscapes, the best policy is to apply fertilizer at about half the rate shown on the package. Both organic and commercial (chemical) fertilizers are good as long as they are considered “all purpose” and balanced, with the major (N nitrogen, P phosphorus, and K potassium) and the minor (trace element) nutrients represented. In the N-P-K ratio shown on the bag, the P should not be a high number because too much available phosphorus will damage the biological make-up of the soil. You could work a slow release granular (for example, 18-6-12 with trace elements) into the cultivated soil before applying the mulch.

### **SOWING SEEDS**

When you have finished cultivating the ground and applying fertilizer, you may want to scatter your favorite wildflower seed mix. We have several available at Tree of Life Nursery. Planting instructions are available.

### **MULCHING**

Late spring is really the best time to apply mulch, but if your soil's surface needs a little organic freshening up, fall is a good time as well. Use well-composted, weed free mulch. Avoid manure products unless they are completely composted and will present no problems with undesirable seeds

or concentrated salts. Wood-based forest humus about two inches deep is best.

### **PLANTING**

Fall is the ideal time to get new plants into the ground. They will receive the seasonal rains, and when the soil warms up again in spring, the plants will be ready to really take off. The only caution is to avoid planting frost sensitive plants (typically a few varieties native to coastal regions) in cold areas. For native plants, the best planting time is fall through spring. Obviously, any plants installed early in the period will benefit from more rainfall.

### **REPLACING PLANTS**

Wouldn't this be a great time to yank out a few of those tired old exotic plants and replace them with some regionally authentic natives? One could argue that anytime is a good time for that, but, given the perfect timing of fall/winter season, you can stop putting it off 'til a rainy day. The rainy day is almost here.



*An Early winter storm and dramatic dark sky over Tree of Life Nursery*

***Then come the winter solstice, Christmas, New Year's... and the sun will slowly start to arc higher in the sky.***