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For much of Earth's history, California was simply seafloor in our deep blue ocean. Plate tectonics and geologic faults pushed up a land mass that has developed into our spectacular California landscape.

People often use the terms "desert" or "Mediterranean climate" to describe our San Diego environment. We are one of only five regions with a Mediterranean-type climate in the world but we are not technically a desert.

These terms also do not take into account our specific types of vegetation and the animal life that inhabits our region.

Scientists, instead, use a term for our combination of geography, flora and fauna: The California Floristic Province. Our floristic province stretches from Oregon to northern Baja, from the ocean through the Sierras, but it does not include the Colorado and Mojave deserts to our east.

Cold ocean currents and high mountains influence our mild climate: short, cool, wet winters and long, hot, dry summers. Because of our geography, climate, water and soils, we have more than 2,000 plants which are found nowhere else in the world. This means that you can garden with plants that are unique to our area, are beautiful, and unusual. Using these species can also help to protect California's heritage.

Our entire province consists of a variety of ecosystems, including sagebrush, coastal sage scrub, chaparral, woodland, forest, riparian (wetland) forest, coastal dunes, and marshes.



CNPS Gardening Committee

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Geology and soils are also extremely varied. Granite soils, as well as volcanic and sedimentary rocks cover large portions of the province. Serpentine, California's state rock, is one of the more unusual soil types, since it lacks nitrogen, potassium and phosphorous (the basic nutrient building blocks and the trio found in almost all fertilizers). Yet some of our most interesting plants have adapted so well to this odd soil that they cannot exist without it.

Here in California, you can see vast areas that are composed of mostly very young or very old rock, as well as stretches of highly acidic or highly alkaline soils. These all contribute to habitat diversity as our plants, over millennia, learned to thrive in these extremes.

In San Diego County, we live amidst the coastal sage scrub - found along our shorelines and stretching a few miles inland. This plant palette exhibits:

- Low-growing strongly-scented foliage
- Drought-deciduous shrubs
- Soft, drought-deciduous leaves

Coastal Sage Scrub plants that you have probably seen in gardens or in the wild:

- White or black sages
- *Artemisia californica* - the classic California sagebrush

As we move inland, the coastal scrub gives way to California's chaparral communities. This evocative name describes a very specific set of characteristics:

- Hard, waxy leaves
- Summer drought-tolerant plants
- Hard evergreen leaves

The word *chaparral* is a loan word from Spanish. The Spanish word comes from the word *chaparro*, which means both small and dwarf evergreen oak, which itself comes from the Basque word, *txapar*, that was used to describe similar-looking fields on the Iberian peninsula.

According to the California Academy of Sciences, chaparral covers five percent of the State of California.

Some of our most well-known plants are chaparral:

- Manzanita - the *Arctostaphylos* family
- *Ceanothus* - called Western Lilac by some
- *Rhus* - leathery leaved large shrubs like the Lemonadeberry

And what happens once we reach the desert? We have two local deserts: Mojave and Anza-Borrego. The Mojave Desert is part of the California Province, while Anza-Borrego is considered part of the Sonoran Floristic Province, which runs down into Baja Mexico. The Sonoran is lower in elevation and the winters are warmer than we typically see in the Mojave. And, according to the National Park Service, it is the only province where the giant saguaro cactus grows wild. So, if you see one, you may have wandered out of the Mojave Desert.

On the other hand, *Yucca brevifolia* (Joshua trees) is considered the indicator species for the Mojave desert. Two plants that are iconic and tell you where you are. Very neat.

Using these California icons in our gardens allows us to celebrate our heritage and encourage a sense of place - no where else in the world!