Native Plants for High-Elevation Western Gardens.

"The textured patchwork of plant communities as they spread, merge, and change tells us the story of our home: where the water flows, where the soils are heavy, where the wind and sun conspire to parch the land, where we have disturbed the earth, where cows and sheep have fed, where elk have stood. When we use native plants in natural combinations, they link us even more closely to our sense of place."—Busco and Morin 2003

Few and far between are books written for landscaping and growing high elevation native gardens, and finally, here is a great one. Award-winning (Garden Globe Award of Achievement for Writing and a 2003 Southwestern Book of the Year), Native Plants for High-Elevation Western Gardens ably rises to the task.

Horticulturist, Jan Busco, elegantly and logically escorts her readership through the essential subjects: climate & its affects on plants and planting, consideration of conditions and available resources, site assessment, landscape plan preparation, planting and seeding techniques as well as monitoring plantings and keeping them well. These topics are succinctly and confidently addressed—clearly evidence of the author’s many years of horticultural experience. The ‘Plant Description’ section describes 150 or so herbaceous perennial species in which character, native range, blooming season, outstanding features, culture, and interesting (really!) detailed comments about use or cultivation of each species. High quality color images illustrate every species, making this book not only a lovely work of art, but one useful for field identification.

While the epicenter for this book is Flagstaff, Arizona, where all of the cultural trials were performed, the information is truly applicable to all of the mountainous western states (4000’–12,000’ elevations) in principal. And, while the species listed within the ‘Plant Description’ section might not be appropriate to introduce, for example, to the Sierra Nevada Mountains, in most cases, the cultural information provided for each genus, can be directly applied to help grow similar species native to other regions.

—MELANIE BAER-KEELEY, Restoration Horticulturist, Sequoia Kings Canyon National Parks, Three Rivers, CA 93271


Theodore Payne arrived in southern California as a young man in the 1890’s, having been recently trained in horticulture in his homeland, England. Early on in his career here, he recognized the uniqueness and fragility of California’s native plants, making a lifelong commitment toward their protection and preservation. As a nurseryman, Payne grew and introduced 400–500 native species into gardens, becoming a noted expert at cultivating and propagating them. It is fortunate for us that he, so early on in southern California’s history, recognized how profoundly altered the wildness of this state would become.

Theodore Payne in His Own Words, a Voice for California Native Plants is a compilation of his writings from primarily 1890–1940. He chronicles his explorations, experiences, observations and career path throughout southern California. Colorful characters parade through the pages of this book as they did in his life, and combined with Payne’s orientation towards all things wild—especially plants—makes for very interesting reading. Having a glimpse of southern California as it was before the deluge of people and development is a rewarding, uncommon treat.

What also makes this book really interesting is Payne’s involvement with prominent botanists, horticulturists, and landscape architects of the day, along with details of several renowned projects. His associates are a veritable ‘Who’s Who’ in his profession, such as Frederick Law Olmstead, Ralph Cornell, Hugh Evans, Kate Sessions, Susanna Bixby Bryant, Dr. Carl Wolfe, and Dr. Francesco Franceschi. Payne’s influence on these people and others ultimately promoted further efforts toward conservation and education. For example, Theodore Payne inspired, designed, as well as propagated plants for two of the premier California native plant botanic gardens and research facilities—Santa Barbara Botanic Garden and Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden. And several of Payne’s other native landscapes—which he also designed and grew plants for—include Exposition Park, Cal Tech, and Descanso Gardens, Torrey Pines State Park, Pomona and Occidental College. His private landscapes were scattered widely through the San Fernando Valley in Pasadena, Hollywood and Beverly