

# How to Convert Your Lawn to a Native Plant Garden



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## Benefits of a Native Plant Garden

The average U.S. household uses 224 gallons of water for outdoor use everyday, much of it to keep our lawns green all year. If you are trying to reduce your outdoor water use, replacing your lawn with drought tolerant plants will make a big difference.

In addition to saving water, replacing your lawn with native plants will vastly improve the habitat value of your garden. While lawns are virtual dead zones for wildlife, native plant gardens support an abundance of pollinators and insects, which in turn are food for birds and other local wildlife species.

If you haven't made the switch to native plants yet, now is the time! Following are 8 easy steps to successfully transition your water thirsty lawn into a beautiful biodiverse native landscape, plus information on how to qualify for rebates from Bay Area agencies.





**SECTION 1:  
PLAN YOUR GARDEN**



# 1. Identify Your Area's Functional Needs



Is the site sunny or shady?



Do I have clay or sandy soil?



Does water pool or soak in quickly?



Do I want to be able to walk on it?



## 2. Design Your New Garden



Our book *San Francisco Bay Area Native Plants For The Garden* has tips on what kinds of plants do well in varying conditions such as clay soil, open meadows with full sun, or full shade conditions, as well as recommendations of which species to plant together.



PURCHASE OUR  
PLANT BOOK HERE





**SECTION 2:  
GET TO WORK**





### 3. Update Your Irrigation

If your lawn area is small, you may find you can get your plants established with hand watering.

If you decide to install irrigation, you can save water by replacing old sprinkler systems with high efficiency spray heads. These spray heads mimic rainfall by slowly putting out larger drops of water. This helps the soil absorb the water better and reduces loss to runoff and wind. High efficiency spray heads need to be run longer than traditional spray heads due to their lower output rate.

There are also several options for setting up a drip system. Depending on the layout of your garden, you may choose to use an “in-line” system which drips water from a main line, or set up a system where smaller lines connect off of your main line to reach plants. Weeding tools or rodents can create leaks in drip lines that waste water if undetected, so check your drip lines periodically and watch for overly wet or dry spots which may indicate a problem.



## 4. Sheet Mulching



We have had the best success removing lawns by sheet mulching which is the process of depriving the grass of light and letting it decompose in place. This method is the cheapest and greenest way to remove your lawn. Here's how to do it:



1. Lay down cardboard directly on top of the lawn and overlap the edges so the grass doesn't get any light



2. Spread 4 inches of arborist mulch on top





You can reuse cardboard boxes or buy rolls of cardboard for your sheet mulching. You can even use your old newspapers, though it needs to be several layers thick.

Woodchips are available at any garden supply company or you can try to get them for free from your local arborist.

It is best to let the sheet mulch sit for a few months to break down before planting, but you can also plant right away by cutting a hole through the cardboard or newspaper layer and removing any remaining lawn.





## 5. Order Your Plants

Our Native Plant Nursery sells a variety of California native plants:

[ORDER FROM OUR NURSERY](#)

You can also visit native plant nurseries in your area to see which plants they already carry, or call your local nursery and ask them to special order the plants you would like.

Here are a few other nurseries in our area that we recommend:

California Native Plant Society Santa Clara Valley  
Central Coast Wilds  
Bloom! California  
Summer Winds



## 6. Install Your Plants

Fall is the best time to plant as it allows the plants to get watered with natural rainfall, and the cool of the fall nights will help the baby plants from getting overstressed. At Grassroots Ecology, we plant anywhere from October-April. Just note that you will have to provide more supplemental irrigation the later in the season you plant. Here's how to plant:



1. Lay out your plants so you know where each one will go.



2. Move aside any mulch to expose the soil and dig a hole twice as deep and wide as the container your plant came in.



3. Remove the plant from its container and place it in the ground. Backfill with the soil you removed and add more soil if needed.



4. Make sure the plant's soil level is even with the ground around it and all its roots are fully covered.



5. Create a small depression around the plant to slowly infiltrate water, rather than run off. Especially on a slope!



6. Water in your new plant—the slower, the better. 5 gallons per shrub/tree and half that for smaller plants.



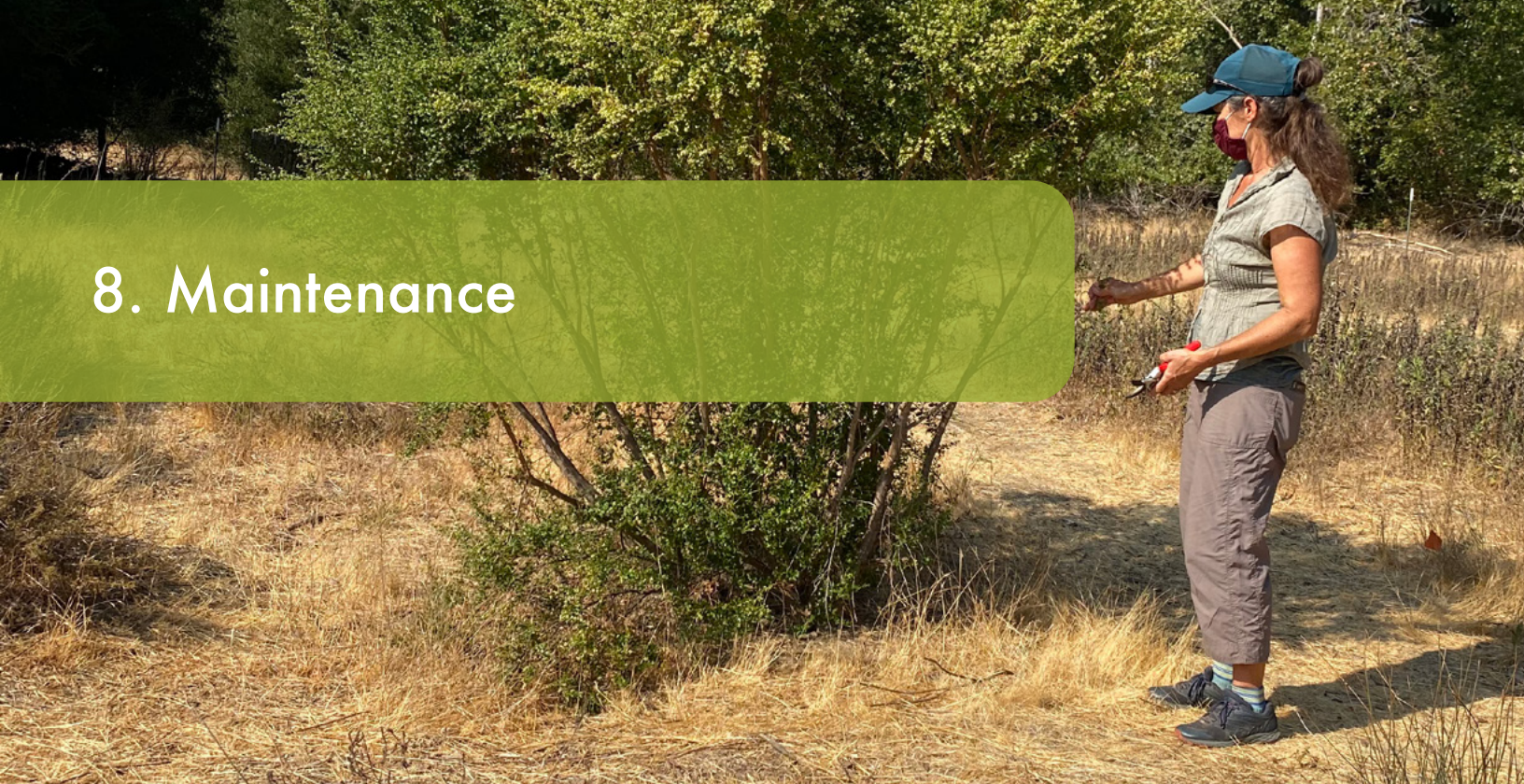
## 7. Provide Supplemental Irrigation



We recommend one deep watering per week for the first 6 months, and then down to once every 10 days to 2 weeks after that depending on soil and exposure. It typically takes 2-3 years for native plants to get established assuming a reasonable rainfall. After that, you can water periodically depending on the weather and your plants' needs. Many plants can be kept green year-round if they are provided some water.



## 8. Maintenance



Maintenance for your garden will typically be less than a lawn, but it will still require some care to look good. Typically the effort is more on a quarterly basis:

In spring you may need to remove any weeds that have come up through the mulch.

Even though native plants are adapted to our climate of dry summers, plan on watering about once a week to keep plants looking greener. If you don't water, plants will go dormant to survive the summer and green up again in the winter.

Grasses should be left to go to seed, and then can be cut to remove the old seed heads in the summer or fall. Perennials can be deadheaded once the flower is spent.

It is also good to apply some fresh compost and wood chips every couple years as well as fill in with replacement plants.





## **SECTION 3: HOW TO QUALIFY FOR A REBATE**





## Rebate Agencies

Rebates can help offset some of the costs of installing new landscaping. Here are some links to Bay Area agencies that are offering rebates for lawn conversions and other outdoor water saving techniques:

VALLEY WATER

BAY AREA WATER SUPPLY AND  
CONSERVATION AGENCY

ALAMEDA COUNTY WATER DISTRICT

CONTRA COSTA WATER DISTRICT

EAST BAY MUNICIPAL WATER DISTRICT

CITY OF SANTA CRUZ





## Rebate Tips

### **Plants**

To qualify for a rebate from Valley Water (the water agency for most of Santa Clara County) and other local agencies, a majority of the plants you install need to be on the pre-approved list. We have reduced Valley Water's approved list to the plants that are native to California and available at our Native Plant Nursery so that you can provide quality habitat:

### APPROVED PLANT LIST

### **Design**

You may need to submit a design to qualify for a rebate, but it does not need to be professionally produced. A sketch and a list of plants should suffice.



## Rebate Tips



### **Irrigation**

There are rebates available for irrigation replacement, but usually you can only apply for an irrigation or a lawn removal rebate.

Take note in the application whether the spray heads need to be a certain distance from the edge of the area to prevent overspray. Oftentimes a landscaping professional can easily extend a spray head into the area with an extender pipe.

### **Pre-inspection**

Some agencies may require a pre-inspection before you begin your new landscaping. Often they want to check that the lawn is still alive to make sure you qualify for the rebate. You can begin work once you have the notice to proceed from the agency.



# Enjoy Your New Biodiverse Ecosystem!



You are now on your way to a beautiful new space filled with native plants! Soon you will see more pollinators, beneficial insects, and birds enjoying the habitat you've created for them. Enjoy the abundance of your new garden!

You can reach out to our nursery to order your plants or ask any native plant questions at [nursery@grassrootsecology.org](mailto:nursery@grassrootsecology.org).

**ORDER FROM OUR NURSERY**



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