

Drought Tolerant Landscaping for Today's Livermore Valley

by Laura Ness

Besides grapes, what should one grow in the Tri-Valley, especially given the natural paucity of rain in the region? Some say it's best to just let the natural landscape rule: grasses and sedges and scrub. That's certainly a beautiful, no-cost, no-additional-water-needed option. However, most people want some kind of greenery or color to anoint their personal space. If you have a large parcel, the choice of what to install comes down to water, money and time.

Taking the trend towards warmer and drier to heart, it might be wise to embrace the Mediterranean climate and celebrate the abundance this brings. A surprising fact to those who associate prolific crops and gardens with copious rainfall and watering, is that the natural flora of Mediterranean regions is much richer than that of more temperate regions. Options abound.

When it comes to crops that might flourish here, unsurprisingly, the obvious choices would be olives and grapes. What about citrus? California is smack in the citrus belt, and warm, dry days and relatively cool nights are perfect for fruit with balanced sugar, plentiful acid and thick rinds. Citrus in Florida and Texas tend to be less acidic, which is why most lemons come from California. Growing citrus en masse, though, is a far more water-intensive activity than vines, even though they do require less water than nut crops. (Many citrus farmers in southern California are ripping out groves and planting vines instead.) Interestingly, Meyer lemons are much less cold sensitive than Eureka's. In the case of all citrus, don't leave mature fruit on the tree, as it can affect the next crop.

Cattle have always been a natural for the Tri-Valley's grass covered hills. Robert Livermore certainly capitalized on this when feeding hungry gold miners

on their way to and from the mines of the foothills. He is also credited with establishing vineyards, pear and olive orchards here. Livestock, whether a recreational interest or a business venture, require abundant water and food, and having to haul in hay grown elsewhere to feed them seems contrarian.

Landowners like Chris and Patti Ising used to graze about 250 head of cattle, but have cut back to only 40, due in large part to drought-associated costs. By the way, forage (wheat, alfalfa) consumes twice as much water as grapevines. When the Isings decided to put 80 of their acres into the Tri-Valley Conservancy about 15 years ago, they debated which crop to install. They considered apples, olives and figs, but went with pistachios instead.

Pistachios require a patient long view of ROI: it takes a full 8 years to see a crop from a pistachio tree. Grape vines can be productive in about half that time. A few more things to know about these wonderful nuts. Pistachios require about 750 hours of cold (3 to 4-hour periods below 43 degrees) in the winter. Pistachios need temperatures of over 85 degrees during the summer in order to ripen, and will shut down when the mercury goes over 106. This makes the Livermore Valley a pretty ideal place to grow these nuts.

Almonds have been taking a lot of heat lately for their water consumption, but pistachios are far less thirsty. According to Chris Ising, they use half the water in their orchard compared to groves in the Central Valley: each pistachio nut takes about .06 gallons, while each almond require 4 gallons per nut.

Olives are a natural part of the Mediterranean landscape and hence a



Agriculture is part of the Livermore Valley's heritage.

very important part of the daily diet. Nobody is more of an advocate for olive trees in the Livermore Valley's climate than Charles T. Crohare, whose Olivina orchard boasts thousands of trees, including Arbequinas, Luccas and Frantoios.

Says Crohare, "It takes four times as much water to grow grapes as it does olives, and ten times that amount to grow almonds." And, they don't need pruning, like grapes, nor do they require expensive oak for aging their product.

For those who think the Tri-Valley might be too hot for veggies, fear not. Ask Melody O'Shea of Beets Hospitality, who has about six acres of vegetable gardens, vines, fruit and olive trees on the outskirts of Livermore. She raises everything from peppers to corn, tomatoes, beans, greens and in between. Tomatoes and strawberries take about the same amount of water to grow, less than half of that required for almonds, wheat or alfalfa.

Says O'Shea, "I have always wondered why we do not grow other crops that do well in a Mediterranean climate, such as capers, that love dry heat and intense sunlight."

If you don't want to grow your own produce, check out the CSAs available in the area. Edible: East Bay has a list on their website. <http://edibleeastbay.com/csa-guide/>

BACKYARD TIPS FROM AN EXPERT

Your own backyard should be a sanctuary, even if you're not planning to raise any crops. Drought tolerant landscape expert, Nancy Rodrigue Molyneaux of RM Winery on Marina Ave, practices what she preaches. Every single thing planted in her beautiful and varied backyard paradise has been carefully curated to survive on extremely low moisture and to provide a visual delight that is worthy of its existence.

She works hand in hand with local Alden Lane Nursery (in business since 1955!) to foster the concept of

sustainable beauty. A visit to the winery will demonstrate exactly how easy it is to establish a very natural looking landscape without a lot of major earth moving and other trauma. Nancy uses rocks and space as efficiently as possible, maximizing the impact of color and greenery, but not making it look cluttered or bare. Tall sunflowers create drama on borders, along with hollyhocks. Her choice of antiques as naturalized décor is whimsical perfection. A rusted old watering can here, or an adorable tricycle in the middle of the garden patch, are sweet touches that inevitably make visitors smile.

Nancy has the following advice to those wishing to go native, including visiting a couple of native garden tours to see the possibilities, purchasing a good book on California native plants such as, *California Native Plants for the Garden*, by Carol Bornstein and frequenting local nurseries that have a native garden section.

She says it's important to decide on an overall concept for the whole area you will be converting to a native/low water use garden. Think, she says, to about shade/sun, existing trees/new trees, short/tall, flowers/greenery, seasonal plants/perennials, hardscape areas/planted areas. An extremely useful first step is to draw borders with a spray landscape paint. Then, it's time to lay out your hardscape: paths, benches, boulders and picnic areas. Rodrigue advises, "Do a lot of this. In the long run, it will save money, because rocks do not die!"

She advocates for installing a drip system, and planting trees and larger background plants the first year, watering them once a week to get them started. Don't overdo it the first year. See what settles in and what doesn't. In the second year, she says to plant the lower level green background plants and to extend the drip lines. You'll also need to replant dead and weak plants from the first year. If all is going well, she says to start planting your "showcase" plants, which would include flowering sages.

"For shade, I planted Bush anemone (*Carpenteria Californica*), Oregon

Grape (*Berberis*), and Honey Bush (not a California native) in quantity as background and greenery. I then planted species of ribes (gooseberries, currants and so forth), coffee plant, etc. I am now filling in with smaller colorful plants for show. There are many of these available at lots of nurseries," says Rodrigue.

As for plants that thrive in sun, she notes: "Ceanothus is mostly a sun-loving species that does well in this dry valley. Yankee Point is a glossy green quickly spreading type that is lushly green, even in drought conditions. It will cover large areas in a year, so it is excellent filler for large spaces. You can break this up with a native grass and boulders. There are some Ceanothus that do best with some shade in the interior valleys, so it's best to consult with a local expert or your garden book."

What not to do is often just as important, if not more so. Says Rodrigue, "Avoid planting native plants in amended soil. Plant them right in the native soil and do not fertilize. Most plants will need water the first year. After that, once a month or not at all, — after all, that is what they are used to — even in scorching hot days. An exception would be plants that originate in the cooler ocean areas like Lemonade Berry from the Santa Barbara Islands. Still, do not over water and be sure to plant high: not in a ditch."

Given the persistent drought conditions, she would only plant native trees, as they grow very well, are immune to neglect and are beautiful. "In my yard, I have planted live oaks, valley oaks, and Madrone. Other options would be Cottonwood, California Bay, California Buckeye and California Sycamore."

Patience is an extremely useful virtue when it comes to landscaping. Says Rodrigue, "Native plants can be hard to get started, so be patient and expect a ten to twenty percent loss. Most of all, do not over water, or they will not survive. The finished product will be as green, colorful and more attractive than your old water-guzzling non-native garden."