Gardening with Natives: Gardens, Water, etc.
by Monica Tudor

The glorious spring weather we’ve been having has finally given way to warmer temperatures more familiar to Bakersfieldians. Summer is almost here! I’ve been decreasing the water given to my California native garden, but even though it’s best for them, my tendency to overwater is still there. I realized I was overwatering my Penstemon palmeri when the leaves started to look odd. Some plants can handle summer water, others will sulk and might eventually die. At least my soil is very sandy, so it drains well and dries out quickly.

Even though fall planting is most often recommended, we do sell plants at the Garden Fest every April. I bought some of the leftovers and planted them, curious to see how they would do. So far, all is good. There is an obvious difference in size between plants put in the ground in fall vs. spring. Of course, that is to be expected. My main concern is how the spring-planted natives will withstand the 100 degree plus days to come. I’ve seen people put up shade over their plants to protect them; that might be an option for the first year.

The irrigation systems in the Campbells’ garden and the Gradeks’ garden prompted me to think about installing irrigation on the southern side of my garden. The plants against the north fence and west boundary of the garden are more established and on a sprinkler system, as are the plants in the shady spot, so they are easy. The island/berm in the middle has drip, and the rest is watered by hand. I’d like to be able to go on vacation and have live plants when I get back, so a timer should be in the plans, too. Another reason to give irrigation a go is because I’ll be doing my front yard in natives this fall and want to make it easier to maintain.

My husband was impressed with the gardens on the garden tour and has given his OK to converting our front yard to native. He’s printed out some pictures of gardens he has found on the Internet and we are discussing plant selection.

He: Let’s put in four Palo Verde trees! Me: They will get too big, we can do one. He: We need to keep the red plum trees. Me: No, they send up suckers all over and it will be a mess digging them out all the time. He: OK, but we gotta keep the pine tree. Me: Sure!

So we work it out. Honestly, though, doing my front yard intimidates me a little bit. Even though I have learned much about growing and maintaining a California garden from all the folks who participate in the discussions at the monthly CNPS meetings, I’m not much of a designer. I want my front yard to look amazing and want other homeowners to see it and be inspired to go native, too. After all, that’s why we do this.

Penstemon palmeri: Fall-planted vs. spring-planted

Penstemon spectabilis: Fall-planted vs. spring-planted

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