

## Vegetation

No discussion of your home is complete without discussing the exterior grounds, grading and drainage, and vegetation. Even those with a “brown thumb” want plants for their homes, typically buying artificial plants for inside and hiring professional gardeners and landscapers for outside.

Problems with grading and drainage cannot be adequately determined during dry weather, so the first time it rains, you should get the umbrella out and walk around the property to see where the water is going. Before you even do that, though, make sure that your home has gutters and downspouts installed to direct rainwater away from the foundation. That, more than anything else, will help prevent foundation damage, as well as cracks in walls and ceilings. If water is standing in any area of the property or is running off the property too quickly, causing erosion, consult with a qualified landscaping professional to correct those problems. Standing water contributes to mosquito breeding, and mosquitoes bring the West Nile Virus.

The best type of plants to put next to your foundation would look those that in Figure 1. Not everyone likes an Arizona type of landscape, so just remember that vegetation—and the related topics of grading and drainage—typically is the biggest problem for our homes. A poor choice is the *Cyperus* shown in Figure 2, which likes a lot of water to do its best. Due to our climate, just about anything will grow with the appropriate amount of water, so finding problems on the exterior grounds related to or caused by water and vegetation is common. Choosing between a lush, tropical landscape (see Figure 3) and a more desert landscape (see Figure 4), and the problems inherent to each, must be left to personal preference. However, I do point out possible water and vegetation problems for your consideration, and since San Diego, as defined by annual rainfall, is a desert (called “desert Mediterranean”), I recommend xeriscape landscaping, or xeriscaping—the use of low water-use plants such as cactus, succulents, and native plants, to help preserve water in our natural desert environment.

By choosing plants that are well matched to San Diego’s environment, along with other factors (soil type, pH, and climate), your landscape can be colorful, water-wise, and low maintenance. Thus, learning about a plant’s preferences and then matching those preferences to local conditions will greatly improve their performance, your happiness, and the envy of your neighbors (not that I’m trying to promote envy or jealousy, you understand). This is what is meant when garden experts recommend using “regionally appropriate” plants.



Figure 1. The best type of foundation landscaping.



Figure 2. *Cyperus* (wrong plant) in foundation crawl space accesses (wrong location).



Figure 3. A high water-use yard.

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Figure 4. A tree-size cactus in a low water-use yard.



Figure 5. Rubber plant; *Ficus elastica*



Figure 6. Ficus tree roots.



Figure 7. Purple ice plant; *Lampranthus spectabilis*



Figure 8. Yellow ice plant; *Malephora luteola*



Figure 9. Vibrant orange ice plant; *Lampranthus aurantiacus*

And I would be negligent if I didn't point out that low water-use landscaping also helps protect your house from wildfires, which are common in San Diego County, and which was demonstrated in the October 2003 fires.

The general rule for watering established plants is to water deeply (a long time) as opposed to watering the surface (a short time). Deep watering encourages the development of deep root systems, which leads to healthy plants. Annuals and perennials need water to a depth of six to twelve inches. However, watering should be slow rather than fast to prevent erosion and to allow the water to soak into the ground. The easiest way to water deeply is with drip irrigation, soaker hoses, or rainbird sprinklers.

Don't plant palm trees or eucalyptus trees near your foundation, near walkways or driveways, or near swimming pools and spas. I can guarantee you that you will have problems. The only Ficus species that you should consider is the common rubber plant (see Figure 5). All others should be left for arboretums and city parks. Unfortunately, the common *Ficus benjamina* shows up in stores around holidays, such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Valentine's Day, and many florist shops carry them year round. However, few of the stores tell you just how large they can get, but if you want to see an example, visit Balboa Park where there are hundreds of Ficus trees (you'll see the large root systems) and eucalyptus trees (the tallest trees in the park). Figure 6 shows a Ficus tree that was in the process of being removed when I did an inspection on the property next door. You can see the type of root system it has, and it had destroyed the foundation of two houses, the one you see in the picture and the one that I inspected. Remember that virtually anything will grow in San Diego's climate if we give it the amount of water that it needs. Some of the plants that I've seen here in San Diego grow to be 35-40 feet tall and 35-40 feet in spread, and they bloom. In Texas where I grew up, they only grew four or five feet and never bloomed. If you have any questions, consult with a good nursery, or contact me.

If you have some barren soil, or some steep hillsides, there's a great selection of drought-tolerant ground covers to hide the soil. The venerable ice plant (see Figure 7, Figure 8, and Figure 9) comes in many different varieties and colors and creates a mass of blooms each year. Verbena (see Figure 10 and Figure 11) and alyssum (see Figure 12) bloom constantly in our climate and come in several colors. Both self-seed very readily and can become weedy if not pruned. Alyssum is very fragrant. The jade plant (see Figure 13) will grow anywhere, does not need any water, and the leaves, as they fall off, root themselves to create new plants.



Figure 10. Maroon verbena; *Verbena* sp.



Figure 11. Purple verbena; *Verbena* sp.



Figure 12. White alyssum, a fragrant, self-seeding ground cover that blooms continuously.



Figure 13. Jade plant; *Crassula ovata*.



Figure 14. Succulents and cacti come in a great variety of shapes and colors; *Agave americana* 'Mediopicta alba'



Figure 15. Some succulents, such as these aeoniums are colorful and provide a "tropical" look.

A good selection of regionally appropriate plants such as cactus, succulents, and other drought-tolerant plants can provide year-round blossoms—excitement for both you and nature's creatures. Succulents and cacti are particularly attractive landscape plants because they exist in a wide variety of shapes and colors (see Figure 14), many providing a tropical look (see Figure 15) and range from small (see Figure 16)—for your foundation planters so you don't have to water heavily next to your foundation—to tree size (see Figure 4)—some capable of providing shade on your patio just as quickly as a tree might grow to the same size.

Many cactus have blooms that rival in beauty those of roses and orchids (see Figure 17, Figure 18, and Figure 19); unfortunately, almost all of them have some pretty serious thorns. Of course, they don't need any watering in San Diego's climate, unlike orchids and roses. A great cactus that has no thorns but has some of the largest blossoms in the plant kingdom is the Epiphyllum family. The San Diego Wild Animal Park has a great collection of Epiphyllums, and there are many at the San Diego Zoo, as well. If you don't have a large yard, I would recommend staying away from the Opuntia family (prickly pear). Most of them get very large and have thorns that put roses to shame. The flowers are, indeed, beautiful, and the fruits are edible, but make sure you have a large yard if you must have them. But if you have young children, just stay away from them.

Many succulents, such as the aloe family (see Figure 20, Figure 21, and Figure 22), have unusual and long-lasting bloom spikes, and many attract humming birds. Come on. Everyone loves humming birds. When you have a chance, check out the great aloe collection throughout the San Diego Zoo, especially when they are blooming November through January. The San Diego Zoo, in addition to being a world-class zoo, is also a world-class arboretum.

The *Agave* family can quickly and easily give you that tropical look that so many San Diegans seem to want. Plant them with the *Aeoniums* and no one would guess that they are low water-use plants. The *Agave attenuata* (see Figure 23) has blossom spikes that get up to 18 feet long and form a large arch (see Figure 24).



Figure 16. Small succulents for foundation planters look tropical and come in a variety of colors.



Figure 17. Bloom on a thornless Bishop's cap cactus; *Astrophytum myriostigma*.



Figure 18. Many cactus blooms rival orchids and roses with their beauty.



Figure 19. Multiple cactus blossoms.



Figure 20. Blossoms of *Aloe brevifolia*; attractive to hummingbirds.



Figure 21. Aloe blossoms



Figure 22. Many succulent blooms, such as these aloes, and especially those with red flowers, attract hummingbirds.



Figure 23. *Agave attenuata*; also see Figure 24.



Figure 24. *Agave attenuata* blossom spike about 15 feet long and forming an arch due to its weight. Also see Figure 23.

Coupled with the large flower spike of *Aeonium holochrysum* (see Figure 25), yep, you'll be the talk of the neighborhood (not that I'm encouraging gossip, you understand). If you want some ferns, try the Foxtail or *Asparagus densiflorus*. I think they only die if you purposefully kill them. They are not true ferns, but they sure do a good job of providing that ferny look with needing all the water.

Note that some plants, such as the castor bean (*Ricinus communis*) and horsetail are extremely invasive. If you must have those two plants in your yard, plant them in a pot. Horsetail, however, takes a lot of water, being naturally a swamp plant. If you have any concerns, consult with a good garden nursery.

Please feel free to contact me for more information on xeriscape landscaping. I'll be happy to introduce you to the world of plants and the excellent nurseries in San Diego county. You can also visit [The Water Conservation Garden at Cuyamaca College](#) for a great selection of helpful books and information about water conservation in our gardens. The Water Conservation Garden also has various activities throughout the year and is available for weddings and other special events, as well as conducting tours and educational programs for



Figure 25. Purple aeonium with hundreds of small, yellow flowers on a long-lasting 2-foot flower spike; *Aeonium holochrysum*



Figure 26. *Cassia* sp.



Figure 27. *Cassia* sp.

students. The [San Diego County Water Authority](#) has helpful information on water conservation, water-wise gardening, and education programs. And lastly, visit the [Family of Southern California Water Agencies](#) for more helpful information on saving water outdoors.

If you need help selecting plants, or finding good and helpful nurseries, just contact me. Tree, bush, ground cover; flowers or foliage; yellow, pink, white; privacy hedges and vines; whatever. If you can't find something, or have something in mind, contact me and I'll help you find it. I love helping people grow plants that make them happy and relaxed in their homes.

### Reference books

Following are some very good books that I have in my library. Many of them are available at our local bookstores, such as Borders and Barnes & Noble, and many are also available used on the Internet.

1. The World Encyclopedia of Cacti & Succulents, by Miles Anderson, ISBN 1-84038-491-3
2. The Complete Book of Cacti & Succulents, by Terry Hewitt, ISBN 0-7894-1657-3
3. Landscape Plants for Dry Regions, by Warren Jones and Charles Sacamano, ISBN 1-55561-190-7
4. Tough Plants for California Gardens: Low Care, No Care, Tried and True Winners, by Felder Rushing, ISBN 1-5918-6189-6
5. Tough Plants for Tough Places, by Gary Vergine and Michael Jefferson-Brown, ISBN 0-8092-2932-3
6. Xeriscape Plant Guide, by Denver Water, ISBN 1-55591-253-2
7. Xeriscaping: Planning and Planting Low-Water Gardens, by Mark Rumary, ISBN 0-8069-4231-2
8. Trees and Shrubs for Flowers, by Glyn Church; ISBN 1-55297-630-0
9. Trees and Shrubs for Foliage, by Glyn Church, ISBN 1-55297-628-9
10. Trees and Shrubs for Fragrance, by Glyn Church, ISBN 1-55297-632-7
11. Ornamental Trees of San Diego: Mediterranean Climate Trees for the Garden, by Steve Brigham, ISBN 0-934797-20-X (Steve is the owner of Buena Creek Gardens in North County, a unique nursery with unique plants).
12. Plants for Dry Climates: How to Select, Grow, and Enjoy, by Mary Rose Duffield and Warren Jones, ISBN 1-55561-176-1
13. Trees and Shrubs for Temperate Climates, by Gordon Courtright, ISBN 0-88192-097-5
14. Succulents II: The New Illustrated Dictionary, by Maurizio Sajeve and Mariangela Costanzo, ISBN 0-88192-449-0
15. Succulents: The Illustrated Dictionary, by Maurizio Sajeve and Mariangela Costanzo, ISBN 0-88192-398-2



Figure 28. Sweet pea tree;  
*Indigofera* sp.



Figure 29. African tulip tree;  
*Spathodea campanulata*



Figure 30. Crepe myrtle;  
*Lagerstroemia indica*

### More good plants for San Diego

Following are some good plants that do very well in San Diego's climate. Keep in mind, though, that you can't just buy a plant from a nursery, take it home and plant it, and hope that it will grow into a beautiful specimen. If you see something here that you like, call me for further information about the plant. If you see something at the plant nursery or anywhere around San Diego, take a picture and [email it to me](#). I'll help you identify it, if necessary, and determine its requirements as far as location, soil, water, wind, and temperature.

1. The *Cassia* species can be maintained as a bush or a tree. It's naturally bushy, as shown in Figure 26, and twice a year it is covered with a long-lasting mass of yellow flowers (see Figure 26 and Figure 27). The buttercup tree and the gold medallion tree are the two best-blooming varieties.
2. The sweet pea tree (*Indigofera*) (see Figure 28) is unusual in that the flower clusters look and smell like sweet pea flowers. The tree is a ragged tree and suckers sprout up everywhere. But the mass of blossoms in the spring can't be beat.
3. The African tulip tree (*Spathodea campanulata*) (see Figure 29) has flowers that look like tulips but are grouped as a mass around a single stem. They start blooming in early summer and can keep blooming through December.
4. The crepe myrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica*) (see Figure 30) needs hot, dry conditions to look its best. For the best crepe myrtle show in San Diego county, drive around Westfield Shoppingtown Parkway in El Cajon, as well as up Fletcher Parkway to La Mesa during the summer months.
5. If you want fragrance, there are very few trees that can compete with the Angel's trumpet (*Brugmansia versicolor*) (see Figure 31). The blossoms are from twelve to eighteen inches long and look like a trumpet. They are most fragrant at night, and they like to droop during the hottest parts of the day, but they recover quickly once the sun goes down. I think the most beautiful ones are the yellow ones, followed by the peach and white ones. There are some very beautiful varieties with double and multiple flowers, but they are difficult to grow.
6. Bougainvillea is a species that can be trained as a bush, a vine, or a tree. Bougainvillea 'San Diego Red' (see Figure 32) is one of the most common bougainvilleas in San Diego. It gets extremely large and has thorns similar to roses. The bougainvillea in Figure 32 was about 15 feet tall and 20 feet wide before I pruned it into a small tree. Bougainvilleas existed naturally in red and purple, but there are now several different colors and varieties on the market, including orange, gold, pink, white, and mixed shades. Some of the newer varieties have smaller thorns, and some with no thorns at all, a distinct advantage. Figure 33 shows two of my favorites: 'Orange King' and 'Jamaica White.' The new varieties sometimes revert to their natural genetic colors; when they do, the flowers on the same plant, and sometimes individual flowers, can have different colors. Note that the "flowers" are actually colorful leaves surrounding a very small, virtually insignificant flower.
7. Dracaena (Figure 34) is commonly a house plant, but it does very well, and grows very large, in most areas of San Diego.



Figure 31. Angel's trumpet; *Brugmansia versicolor*. Also listed as *Datura* sp.



Figure 32. *Bougainvillea* 'San Diego Red'



Figure 33. Dwarf bougainvilleas: 'Orange King' and 'Jamaica White'; *Bougainvillea* sp.



Figure 34. *Dracaena marginata*



Figure 35. Spanish dagger; *Yucca gloriosa*



Figure 36. Hibiscus; *Hibiscus rosasinensis*

8. There are many varieties of the common Yucca, but the Spanish dagger has the best flower display (see Figure 35).
9. Hibiscus (Figure 36) is a medium-sized bush with larger flowers in a great variety of single colors and color combinations. As much as I like hibiscus, I don't have them anymore here in San Diego because they are subject to significant infestations of whitefly in our climate.
10. If you need a good vine to grow on your fences and provide an awesome display for flowers and great privacy, morning glory (*Ipomoea*) is it (see Figure 37). Several different colors are available, and the flowers are large, opening in the morning and closing in the evening.
11. The African daisy (*Osteospermum fruticosum*) (see Figure 38) is often called "freeway daisy" here because it grows so naturally along the freeway. Some people confuse it with ice plant. It is great on moderately sloped hillsides and needs little water once established.
12. Statice, or sea lavender (*Limonium perezii*) (see Figure 39) grows just about anywhere in the county. I specifically like it because it blooms year round and the cut flowers are long-lasting and papery. Where unusual weather conditions seem to kill it, it comes back quite readily.
13. The California fuchsia (*Zauschneria californica*) is not a fuchsia at all, but many people mistake it for one. Although it doesn't need much water, the leaves and flowers can be damaged by the hot, dry Santa Ana winds. It readily comes back, though. That shown in Figure 40 was about three feet tall before the extreme heat of July 2006 destroyed the above-ground stems.
14. Kalanchoes (Figure 41) are sold in every grocery store and home improvement store in the county in the late fall. They are typically florist plants, meaning that they are meant to be thrown out when they quit blooming. However, I hate to throw a living plant away, and my experimentation has shown that they do very well in pots and will bloom season after season. The one in Figure 41 is was four years old and continues to provide a great display each year.



Figure 37. Morning glory;  
*Ipomoea* sp.



Figure 38. African daisy;  
*Osteospermum fruticosum*



Figure 39. Sea lavender or  
Statice; *Limonium perezii*



Figure 40. California fuchsia;  
*Zauschneria californica*



Figure 41. *Kalanchoe* sp.



Figure 42. Geranium;  
*Pelargonium* sp.



Figure 43. Crown of thorns;  
*Euphorbia milii*



Figure 44. Lily of the Nile;  
*Agapanthus africanus*



Figure 45. Kangaroo paws;  
*Anigozanthos* sp.

15. Geraniums (*Pelargonium*) at one time a few decades ago were America's favorite bedding plant. With the onset of genetic cross breeding in the gardening industry, geraniums lost their place of favor, but they are making a comeback now that genetic cross breeding has finally made it to their group. There are many, many different flower and leaf variations; the varieties seem to be endless. Figure 42 shows a favorite, with its deep pink/purple flowers.
16. The Crown of thorns is a plant that my grandmother got me interested in. Figure 43 shows a cutting off of her 50-year-old plant that she gave me in 2003 just before she went on to her garden in the sky. There are now varieties with huge blossoms, and they'll grow anywhere and bloom year round even with total neglect.
17. The Lily of the Nile (*Agapanthus africanus*) was the first plant that I saw when I first visited California back in 1979. My uncle lived in Huntington Beach and had them everywhere. I fell in love with them, but I now like the smaller dwarf varieties (Figure 44) better than the long-stemmed ones. The dwarfs have more and longer-lasting blossoms.

18. Figure 45 shows Kangaroo paws (*Anigozanthos*), a fairly recent introduction to San Diego. Their leaves look like lilies but they don't require water like most lilies do, and a mass planting makes a stunning display when they bloom. The flowers come in red, yellow, and, interestingly, green.
19. The Lion's tail (*Leonotis leonurus*) is one of my favorite bushes because the way it flowers is unusual and the flowers attract lots of hummingbirds. Figure 46 shows a large specimen about five feet in height. They react well to pruning, simply putting out a rush of new branches with more flowers.
20. I do a lot of container gardening because I can change up the landscape when I want. I have a row of different types of red clay pots lining my driveway. Figure 47 shows a pencil cactus, in this case the stunning "Sticks of Fire" (*Euphorbia tirucalli*). The Euphorbia family is varied and includes many different species that you would never think were in the same plant family. For example, the common Christmas poinsettia is a *Euphorbia*. If you have young, inquisitive children in your household, you should stay away from the Euphorbias. Their beautiful colors are quite attractive to young children, but their white, milky sap is poisonous if ingested and can cause skin rashes and allergies in some people. Figure 48 shows a different type of *Euphorbia*, also in a red clay pot along my driveway.
21. Figure 49, the propeller plant or scarlet paintbrush (*Crassula falcata*), is a succulent with silvery gray-green leaves. It's vibrant scarlet flower heads look like paintbrushes. It's difficult to find, but it's worth searching out and growing.
22. The lantana (see Figure 50) is another species that had fallen out of favor but is making a comeback. It blooms year round in San Diego, and some flower heads bud as one color, open as another color, and fade to yet another color. So one can have many different colors on one flower head. They used to be limited to common, pale colors, but genetic breeding has increased their color range. The leaves are very fragrant and make great potpourri. Why pay \$5 per bag of potpourri when you can grow your own?



Figure 46. Lion's tail; *Leonotis leonurus*



Figure 47. "Sticks of fire" pencil cactus; *Euphorbia tirucalli* 'Sticks of fire'



Figure 48. *Euphorbia albipollenifera*



Figure 49. Propeller plant or scarlet paintbrush; *Crassula falcata*



Figure 50. *Lantana* sp.



Figure 51. *Stapelia* sp. or *Huernia* sp.



Figure 52. “Brain” succulent



Figure 53. Dragonwing begonia;  
Begonia ‘Dragon Wing’



Figure 54. Angel wing begonia



Figure 55. Wax begonia

23. If you like star-shaped flowers, the *Stapelia* and *Huernia* species (see Figure 51) are for you. The flower starts off as a balloon-shaped bud, bursting open overnight into a fuzzy star-shaped flower. Figure 51 shows the fuzz very well. The flowers of *Stapelia grandiflora* can be up to seven or eight inches across. The plants and flowers are unusual, difficult to find in our local nurseries, but well worth growing,—and proudly showing to your neighbors.
24. Figure 52 is one of my favorite succulents, going by the common name of “brain succulent.” It has nodules on the leaves that do, indeed, look like brains.
25. Lastly, Figure 53, Figure 54, and Figure 55 show three plants from my favorite bedding plant family, the begonias. The waxleaf begonias (see Figure 55) grow virtually anywhere in our climate and don’t seem to be affected by salt air, cold air, hot air, or high winds. They bloom year round and respond well to pruning since they can get tall and leggy. The dragonwing begonia shown in Figure 53 is my favorite, followed by the angel wing begonia shown in Figure 54. One can cut back the plant and root the cuttings in a glass of water.

If you have any questions about any type of plant, xeriscaping, and appropriate landscaping for our desert Mediterranean climate, simply contact me.