

Final Report to the  
Elvenia J. Slosson Endowment Fund  
for work performed from July 1, 2003 to June 30, 2004

**California Native Plants for the Home Garden:  
Interpretive Exhibits at the UC Davis Arboretum**

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We received funding to develop a series of interpretive signs and labels to educate Arboretum visitors about California native plants, how to choose appropriate native plants for Central Valley gardens, and how to grow them successfully.

We began the exhibit development process by surveying Arboretum visitors about their knowledge of and interest in native plants, and identifying what they wanted to learn about growing natives. Arboretum interpretive staff then generated educational messages for the native plant collection based on this front-end evaluation. We convened a group of staff, interns and volunteers to lead the exhibit development process. This exhibit team participated in a training course that covered learning theory, interpretive messages, and visitor studies theory and methods.

In September, 2003 and again in April, 2004 we held Team Exhibit Weeks, during which teams of people from different disciplines and audiences generated sign ideas and created sign mock-ups. They then tested the mock-ups in the garden by observing visitor responses (How long did they spend looking at the sign? Did they discuss it with their companions?) and asking visitors what they thought the messages of the sign were. The teams refined and re-tested successful signs and re-thought unsuccessful ones, continually improving their mock-ups until they generated the greatest possible visitor interest and involvement.

Following the Team Exhibit Weeks, the exhibit team further evaluated and refined the sign ideas. We worked with a professional designer to create a series of large interpretive panels, with themes such as "Should I Grow a Redwood?" for the Redwood Grove, "Don't Soak Your Oak" for the Shields Oak Grove, and "Gardening with Native Plants" for the Mary Wattis Brown Garden. Arboretum staff also

produced a series of smaller signs addressing topics such as caring for native oaks; soil amendments and cover crops; relationships between specific native plants and the birds, insects and mammals that depend on them; and “How to Create a Backyard Wildlife Habitat Garden.” At the Arboretum Terrace Home Demonstration Garden, we installed a series of signs featuring individual native plants that thrive in Central Valley gardens. We also created and installed 260 highly visible, permanent identification labels for native plants in our collections.

The new interpretive signs and labels make the Arboretum more useful as a source of information and inspiration for home gardeners, and enhance the visitor experience for all visitors. Interpretive signs and plant labels guide visitors through the garden and provide access to the horticultural ideas that underlie the garden design. We believe that they can help change visitors’ attitudes about what constitutes a beautiful garden, and inspire them to make the transition to low-input, low-maintenance gardening using California native plants.



Arboretum staff and volunteers brainstormed the best ways to convey educational messages, created mockups of signs, and tested them with Arboretum visitors.



Mockups were refined or redesigned based on audience responses.



We observed visitors reading the signs, measured how long they spent, and asked them what information they came away with.

# SHOULD I GROW A redwood?

**You decide.** But since coast redwoods do not naturally grow here in the Central Valley, it's important to learn more.

**to grow...**

- Long-living, attractive trees with few diseases
- Provide shade for cool summer refuge
- Fast-growing trees provide privacy and wind screens (grow up to five feet per year)
- Once redwoods are established (after five years), need less watering
- Fallen leaves on ground dampen noise
- Plant near a lawn for easy watering, but over time, redwood will shade out lawn

**or not to grow**

- Redwoods are very large (up to 50 feet tall, 15 feet diameter canopy) and need sufficient room to grow
- May need to have the top cut off to clear power lines
- Redwoods are high water users and will always need extra summer water; young trees need water year round
- Redwoods keep leaves all year and block sun in winter
- Boron in local water turns needles brown
- Redwoods planted here never look as healthy as they do on the coast
- Redwoods need well-drained soil so roots can get oxygen




Photo: Peter D'Elia/Steve Delaney of Delaney  
Can you imagine this in your yard?

T. Elliot Weitz Redwood Grove

ARBORETUM

We worked with a professional exhibit design firm to produce the finished signs.