Using container plants in a restoration project

Some sites may benefit from introduction of container plants. For instance, the native seed bank might be diminished because extensive grading. Or you might want to get more coverage more quickly than possible by seeding. In weedy areas, using container plants properly will result in a much higher chance for plant establishment than spreading seed alone, which is frequently ineffective due to the weeds and our unpredictable rains.

Appropriate container plants are grown from seed either collected in the wild or propagated from wild-collected seed. Don't use "horticultural varieties" of plants (*e.g*. *Ceanothus* "Dark Star"), even if they are derived from local species. The reason: horticultural varieties are typically selected from a single or small number of individuals, for a particular characteristic which suits a landscaping requirement. This greatly reduces the genetic variability that wild plants need to survive without care in a natural environment. If used in large quantities, the genes from horticultural varieties may even reduce the fitness of wild populations.

How to use container plants

- Assess your site: is it riparian or upland? Coastal sage scrub or chaparral? With coastal influence or inland? You can figure out what *should* be growing on the site by visiting other natural lands in your area, or by consulting the California Native Plant Society for advice.
- Use container plants grown from seeds collected as close as possible to the restoration site. Don't use horticultural selections.
- Obtain the container plants. You can grow your own, or order from commercial sources (see www.cnpssd.org /horticulture for a list of native plant nurseries).
- Identify water source: even if they are low-water-use plants, container plants *must* be watered when they are planted and several times afterwards. If houses are close by, homeowners may be willing to donate water from a hose tap, especially after you explain the purpose of the project. Other possibilities are carrying the water in using 1-gallon jugs, or from containers transported to the site in a truck or all-terrain vehicle.
- Prepare the hole: use a 'duckbill" shovel or pickax to dig the hole, and arrange the excavated soil into a circular "levee". The goal is to put the plant in the middle of a depression that will retain water. The proper technique is difficult to describe, so you may want to visit a project where you can learn the details.
- Water the hole: fill the hole with water and let it soak in. Do this again as many times as you can. You are creating a "water account" for the plant that will help it to grow deep roots.
- Remove the plant from the container as gently as possible. Contrary to advice for typical landscape plants, don't rip into the root ball of natives; many will not appreciate it.

- Place the plant in the hole; add back soil to the original level of the soil in the container. Tamp the soil around the plant with your hand or foot to eliminate air spaces around the roots. Pour more water on top to further settle the soil around the root ball.
- Rock mulch
- Water some more, until you run out of time or water Then do a rain dance – a good soaking rain will save you lots of labor. In its absence, you need to return to the site in 2-3 weeks and water the plants again; at this point, you will appreciate having well-designed basins around the plants. If you plant in the rainy season (November – February) and get a couple of good soaking rains, you won't have to water through the summer. If you plant outside of this season, watering through the summer will be necessary to help your plants survive.