San Francisco Drought Tolerant Plants

San Francisco has a variety of soil types, weather (including wind and fog) and water sources. San Francisco plants evolved in plant communities associated with those varied soils, weather and water sources. San Francisco plant communities include dune, northern coastal dune scrub, oak woodland, chaparral, riparian/creekside, tidal/brackish marsh, fresh water marsh, salt water marsh and lakes/ponds.

Not all California native plants are drought tolerant. Plants that evolved in or near our riparian/creekside, tidal/brackish marsh, fresh water marsh, salt water marsh and lakes/ponds are not drought tolerant.

When native plants are drought tolerant, they grow best when watered regularly, at least weekly, for the first 2 years or two after they are planted. That’s why it’s advised that you plant smaller plants (1 gallon pots or 4 inch pots) because they are more likely to survive between watering periods while they grow their roots systems.

WUCOLS (water use classification of landscape species) is a University of California extension database of native and non-native/introduced plants need for water across the state of California. If your water district funds replacement of current plants or pavement with drought tolerant plants, then your water district will require that you select WUCOLS Very Low or WUCOLS Low plants.

https://ucanr.edu/sites/WUCOLS/Plant_Search/

WUCOLS Very Low and Low plants are easier to establish in new gardens with less watering after planting. These plants exist in dune, northern coastal dune scrub, oak woodland and chaparral plant communities. Only the easiest lowest water native plants are on this drought tolerant plant list below.

This list is a combination of plants rated Very Low from the UC extension WUCOLS website, plus recommendations from Calscape for Very Low water use, plus plants recommended as easy to grow by a variety of local gardeners

**Ground covers**
Sagebrush (Artemisia californica ‘Canyon Gray’, ‘Montara’ ground cover selections) - full sun, gray foliage, WUCOLS Low
Seascale (Atriplex leucophylla) - full sun, yellow flowers, WUCOLS Very Low
Coyote Bush (Baccharis pilularis 'Twin Peaks No. 2', 'San Bruno Lady’, ground cover selection) - full sun, WUCOLS Low
Beach Evening Primrose (Camissoniopsis cheiranthifolia, cheiranthifolia ssp. cheiranthifolia, cheiranthifolia ssp. suffruticosa, micrantha) - full sun, yellow flowers, WUCOLS Low
Yerba Buena (Clinopodium douglasii) - pt shade/shade, flat x 3, tiny white flowers, edible leaves, WUCOLS Low
Sand Pygmy Stonecrop (Crassula connata) succulent - sun, WUCOLS Low
Bluff Lettuce (Dudleya farinosa) succulent - sun, yellow flowers, WUCOLS Low
Seaside Daisy (Erigeron glaucus) - sun/pt shade, pink flowers, WUCOLS Low
Gumweed (Grindelia stricta var. platyphylla) - yellow flowers (long bloom June-Sept), WUCOLS Low
San Bruno Mountain Golden Aster (Heterotheca sessiliflora ssp. bolanderi 'San Bruno Mountain') - ground cover, sun, yellow flowers, WUCOLS Unknown
Douglas Iris (Iris douglasiana) - pt shade/shade, purple flowers (other colors available), WUCOLS Low
Beach Knotweed (Polygonum paronychia) - ground cover, all sun/shade, sand only, WUCOLS Unknown
Yellow Stonecrop (Sedum spathulifolium) succulent - sun, yellow flowers, WUCOLS Low
California Aster (Symphyotrichum chilense and subspicatum) - sun/pt shade, lavender flowers, WUCOLS Unknown
Dune Tansy (Tanacetum bipinnatum) - yellow flowers (long bloom July-Oct), good drainage/sand, WUCOLS Low
Miner's Lettuce (Claytonia perfoliata) - ground cover, annual, summer deciduous, shade, no WUCOLS available but needs about 8 inches of rain to sprout, flower and go to seed, grows well in Los Angeles, as well as in San Francisco

**Shorter flowers**
Yarrow (Achillea millefolium) - any sun/shade, white flowers, WUCOLS Low
Pearly Everlasting (Anaphalis margaritacea) - white flowers, WUCOLS Low
Dune Sagewort (Artemisia pygmaea) - full sun, 2x3, gray foliage, WUCOLS Low
Quail Bush (Atriplex lentiformis) good drainage/sand, WUCOLS Unknown
California Fuchsia (Epilobium canum) - full sun, 2x3, orange-red flowers, WUCOLS Unknown
Mock Heather (Ericameria ericoides) - yellow flowers, good drainage/sand, (long bloom Sept-Nov), WUCOLS Low
Coast Buckwheat (Eriogonum latifolium) - cream flowers, good drainage/sand, WUCOLS Low
Nude Buckwheat (Eriogonum nudum, nudum var. nudum) - cream flowers, good drainage/sand, WUCOLS Low
California Poppy (Eschscholzia californica) - orange flowers annual, WUCOLS Very Low
Checker Lily (Fritillaria affinis) - yellow and orange flowers bulb, WUCOLS Very Low
Gumweed (Grindelia stricta, stricta var. angustifolia) - yellow flowers (long bloom June-Sept), WUCOLS Low
Coyote Mint (Monardella villosa, villosa franciscana) - purple flowers, WUCOLS Very Low
Phacelia (Phacelia californica) - purple flowers, WUCOLS Low
Cudweed (Pseudognaphalium californicum) - white flowers, WUCOLS Unknown
Bee Plant (Scrophularia californica) - tiny red flowers, WUCOLS Low

**Shrubs**
California Sagebrush (Artemisia californica) - full sun, 3x4, gray foliage, WUCOLS Low
Mugwort (Artemisia douglasiana) - sun/pt shade, 8x4, gray foliage, WUCOLS Low
Coyote Bush (Baccharis pilularis) - full sun, 10x12, yellow flowers, (long bloom Sept-Jan), evergreen, WUCOLS Low
Golden Yarrow (Eriophyllum confertiflorum, lanatum and staechadifolium) - sun/pt shade, 5x5, yellow flowers, evergreen, good drainage/sand, (long bloom Feb-Aug) WUCOLS Low
Coffeeberry (Frangula californica) - any sun/shade, 15x15, evergreen, shearable, WUCOLS Low
Ocean Spray (Holodiscus discolor) - shade/pt shade, 16x15, white scented flowers, good drainage/sand (long bloom May-July), WUCOLS Low
White Pitcher Sage (Lepechinia calycina) - sun/pt shade, 5x5, white flowers, evergreen, good drainage/sand, WUCOLS Low
Coastal Bush Lupine (Lupinus arboreus) - full sun, 7x4, yellow flowers, evergreen, WUCOLS Low
Dune Bush Lupine (Lupinus chumissonis) - full sun, 7x3, purple flowers, evergreen, good drainage/sand, WUCOLS Unknown
Malva Rosa (Malva assurgentiflora) - any sun/shade, 13x10, dark pink flowers, evergreen, (long bloom Feb-July) WUCOLS Low
Bush Mallow (Malacothamnus fasciculatus, fremontii) - full sun, 16x10, pink flowers, evergreen, WUCOLS Very Low (not SF native) (long bloom June - Sept)
Chaparral Currant (Ribes malvaceum, menziesii, menziesii var. menziesii) - sun/pt shade, 8x5, pink flowers, good drainage/sand, (long bloom Dec-March) WUCOLS Very Low
Sage (Salvia Celestial Blue, brandegei) - full sun, 5x4, blue flowers, WUCOLS Low

Grasses
Giant Wildrye (Elymus condensatus) sun, 3x2, WUCOLS Low
Blue bunchgrass (Festuca idahoensis) sun, 2’x0.5’, WUCOLS Very Low
Red Fescue (Festuca rubra) - sun/part shade, low growing bunch grass, can be mowed 1’x2’, WUCOLS Low
Melica (Melica imperfecta) - sun, 4’x1’, summer deciduous, WUCOLS Very Low
Purple Needlegrass (Stipa pulchra, cernu, lepida) - sun, 3’x1.5’, WUCOLS Very Low

Vines
Morning Glory vine (Calystegia purpurata, purpurata ssp. purpurata, soldanella) - showy pink and white flowers, WUCOLS Low
Clematis (Clematis lasiantha) WUCOLS Low, showy white flowers, deciduous
Pacific Pea (Lathyrus vestitus) - pink flowers, (long bloom March-May)
WUCOLS Unknown, probably low
Pink Honeysuckle (Lonicera hispidula) showy pink flowers, deciduous, WUCOLS Low

Trees
Coast Silk Tassel (Garra elliptica) - sun/part shade, fog loving, 16 ft evergreen tree, showy tassels on males, WUCOLS Low
Toyon (Heteromeles arbutifolia) - full sun, evergreen, showy red berries, white flowers, 30 ft evergreen tree, WUCOLS Low
Coast Live Oak (Quercus agrifolia) - full sun, 70 ft evergreen tree, keystone oak woodland tree, best grown from an acorn, acorns available from large oak trees in October, WUCOLS Very Low
Blue Elderberry (Sambucus nigra ssp. caerulea) - all sun/shade, edible blue berries, white flowers, 30 ft deciduous tree, WUCOLS Medium, behaves like WUCOLS Low

Containers, pots and window boxes - all these plants do well in the ground as well as in containers
One Leaf Onion (Allium unifolium) - sun, pink flowers bulb, WUCOLS Very Low
Soap Plant (Chlorogalum pomeridianum, pomeridianum var. pomeridianum, pomeridianum var. divaricatum) bulb, sun/pt shade, white flowers, WUCOLS Very Low
Miner's Lettuce (Claytonia perfoliata) - shade/pt shade, ground cover, annual, edible, summer deciduous, shade, WUCOLS Unknown
Farewell-to-Spring (Clarkia unguiculata) - sun/part shade, multiple colors include pink, purple, red, melon and cream, WUCOLS Unknown
Blue Dicks (Dipterostemon/Dichelostemma capitatum, capitatum ssp. capitatum, congestum) - sun, blue-purple flowers bulb, WUCOLS Very Low
Blue Field Gilia (Gilia capitata, capitata ssp. chamosis) - sun, purple-blue flowers, WUCOLS Unknown
Goldfields (Lasthenia californica, glabrata, glabrata ssp. glabrata, minor) - sun, yellow flowers annual (long bloom Feb-June), WUCOLS Unknown
Lupine (Lupinus bicolor, nanus) - sun, blue or purple flowers depending on species (long bloom Apr-July), WUCOLS Unknown
Baby Blue Eyes (Nemophila menziesii) - sun/pt shade, blue flowers, WUCOLS Unknown
Phacelia (Phacelia ciliata, distans, douglasii, malvifolia, nemoralis, ramosissima) - sun, purple flowers, WUCOLS Unknown
Dotseed Plantain (Plantago erecta) - sun, WUCOLS Unknown
Chia sage (Salvia columbariae) - sun, blue flowers, edible leaves, flowers and seeds, WUCOLS Unknown
Blue Eyed Grass (Sisyrinchium bellum) - sun/pt shade, purple-blue flowers bulb, WUCOLS Very Low
Ithuriel's spear (Triteleia laxa) - sun/pt shade, purple flowers bulb, WUCOLS Very Low

Calscape is CNPS's plant selection tool with California native plant pictures, plant size at full growth, soil types, sun/shade needs, water needs, butterfly and moth caterpillar value (chewed leaves are the sign of happily fed butterfly caterpillars and are good!) and nurseries with plant availability.
https://www.calscape.org/

Calflora has detailed bloom periods for California native plants
https://www.calflora.org/

Las Pilitas Nursery has details about growing drought tolerant plants
https://www.laspilitas.com/garden/drought.html

California drought monitors and drought visualization
https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/
https://www.drought.gov/states/california
https://www.californiadrought.org/drought/current-conditions/
http://cdec.water.ca.gov/

Check your local water district’s website. Your local water district may provide incentives to remove your lawn and replace your lawn and/or paved areas with WUCOLS Very Low and WUCOLS Low plants.

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California native plant leaves feed butterfly caterpillars. Please plant our native plants, avoiding introduced plants and invasive plants, to feed beautiful local butterflies. Chewed leaves are the
sign of happily fed butterfly caterpillars and are good! More information about these lovely plants and butterflies is available on butterfly plant lists in CNPS-YB’s biodiversity resources website and on Calscape.
http://cnps-yerbabuena.org/biodiversity/biodiversity-resources/
https://www.calscape.org/

Edible plant information is from Daniel Moerman’s Native American Ethnobotany book and database which detail how Indian tribes used native plants for food, medicine and tools.
http://naeb.brit.org/

California Native Plant Society - Yerba Buena (San Francisco) chapter offers free plant lists, free hikes and free speaker series
http://cnps-yerbabuena.org/
http://cnps-yerbabuena.org/biodiversity/biodiversity-resources/