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Falling In Love with Native Plants: Bringing Native Habitat Back to the UCLA Campus

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“What about a campaign with this slogan: ‘Falling Back In Love with California Native Plants’?” Stephanie Landregan asked with a coy smile. We sat in her office on Valentine’s Day, brainstorming how we might dismiss any apprehension towards incorporating more California native plant species on the UCLA campus. Stephanie, Director of both the Landscape Architecture and the Horticulture and Gardening program at UCLA Extension, has taught at the extension school for over 20 years and has cultivated a wealth of knowledge surrounding best practice landscaping for the region. We came to her to find out how to make native plants the next iconic, beloved UCLA campus feature—the new red brick building or lush green lawn. Immediately interested, Stephanie explained that teaching the UCLA community to fall in love with native plants and the life they support would be a necessary step in expanding the use of native plants on campus.

UCLA has the unique opportunity to enhance its urban setting within the greater natural ecosystem of Southern California by reintegrating the biodiversity in a region where plant and animal life commonly suffers from diverse man-made stressors. “Falling in love” with native plants and applying management practices that prioritize urban ecosystem habitat creation, drought tolerance, biodiversity, and prevention of invasive species proliferation in current and future plans, can UCLA could lead the way in shaping the future of large-scale sustainable urban landscaping. Integrating ecologically sound landscaping at UCLA could give the campus the opportunity to a pinnacle of aesthetics, resilient to climate change, and a leader in conservation in a way that benefits the students, faculty, community, and the region as a whole, making it a model for other institutions to follow.

Our project goal as the SAR Biodiversity & Native Landscaping Team is to assess campus attitudes, accumulate professional advice, and facilitate progression towards incorporating more native plants into UCLA landscaping. In our final report, we aim to create a set of recommendations for introducing ecologically-sound planting practices across campus. After partnering with key stakeholders on the UCLA campus and experts on biodiversity in the Los Angeles area, we will compile the assorted knowledge and experiences to create ecologically favorable recommendations for landscaping design across campus.

Landscaping projects at UCLA are managed by different entities across campus, and as a consequence, opportunities for fostering sustainable, native landscaping and purposeful mixed-use spaces are sometimes missed. In recognition of this, UCLA informed our team that it will be reconvening a sustainable landscaping task force to look at developing a drought-tolerant palette and assess other sustainable landscaping issues. The task force was focused on Sage Hill the last two years and now will be returning focus to campus-wide planning. The Office of Sustainability and the Campus Architect have also been discussing the need for a master landscaping plan for the campus. Additionally, UCLA has already begun transitioning ornamental lawn areas into drought tolerant and native landscaping and incorporating native plants into new construction, and plans to incorporate stormwater architecture into these areas to capture and filter stormwater in the future. Although individual landscaping project designs
have been vetted by these entities, a more comprehensive set of recommendations would help ensure future projects promote a more cohesive campus landscape. As UCLA looks to develop best practices for landscaping, the campus can benefit from a researched set of recommendations detailing a consistent aesthetic of native and drought-tolerant landscaping for any department to follow.

To create recommendations that are useful to UCLA’s campus in particular, our project aims to provide a comprehensive, evidence-based proposal for prioritizing native and ecologically-appropriate landscaping. These recommendations will be built upon an earlier set of sustainable landscaping recommendations developed by a student in the UCLA Extension Sustainability Certificate through an internship with the Office of Sustainability. We will gather our data by reaching out to other universities and institutions with successful landscaping programs, conducting a survey to gauge student opinion on native landscaping preferences, utilizing AutoCAD and GIS map-based analysis of green-spaces on campus to produce quantitative data, and assembling a palette of native plants. We will conduct outreach to other institutions to evaluate their progress and challenges with incorporating native landscaping practices into their campuses. The survey will identify a diverse array (over 33 UCLA majors) of UCLA students’ plant preferences, primary values in urban landscaping, and ability to identify native plants. Our plant palettes and map will be designed to identify underutilized spaces on campus that UCLA Facilities plans to redesign as biophilic study spaces and to recommend native and ecologically-appropriate plants that support the construction of self-sustaining ecosystems in these spaces. Overall, these three data-collection approaches strive to comprehensively assess UCLA’s attitude, progress, and potential in regards to incorporating more native plants and biomass into the current campus landscape. Campus green spaces are one of the university’s greatest assets, and have the capability to become a paragon of sustainability and biodiversity-conscious landscaping and space usage. Creating an ecologically sound and aesthetic landscape on UCLA’s campus has the potential to transform the community, instilling knowledge of and love for biodiversity in urban spaces into future generations of Bruins.

As UCLA moves forward with landscaping, imagine walking along Bruinwalk surrounded by new sights and sounds. Colorful butterflies gliding through the air, lively lizards rustling through the bushes, and birds singing in the trees. These sights and sounds can be brought to our campus through the expansion of native landscaping. Falling in love with California’s native plant life does not exclusively mean enjoying the plants themselves, it means falling for all of the animals and activity that come along with them. So next time you find yourself in a garden, look for a native and witness all of the life that thrives around it. As the campus moves forward with drought-tolerant plant conversions and new study spaces, our cohesive set of recommendations will
hopefully cultivate a love for natives, ensuring that all future landscape plans are ecologically beneficial!

Construction has already started on the new MS outdoor study space--while plants might be drought tolerant, lack of proper cohesive set of recommendations may lead to planting that is not ecologically sound. Developing our cohesive set of recommendations and cultivating a love for natives will hopefully ensure that all future landscape plans are 100% ecologically beneficial!