

Q: What can I plant under large trees that do not require a lot of summer water?

A: There are a number of choices available to you, but here are several more readily available from local nurseries. Coral bells, (*Heuchera spp*, pronounced Hyoo-curr-uh), are one of the most useful plants for shady, low-water gardens. The heart-shaped leaves can mound or form low mats under trees and shrubs, and come in green to burgundy shades, some with delicate marbling or silver sheen. The leaves can be slightly wooly (tomentose) or shiny. Heuchera's bloom in the spring with airy wands of tiny blossoms held well above the foliage in red, white or pink clouds. There are many different cultivars of heucheras available, but if you are looking for ones best adapted to our Mediterranean climate, look for cultivars with *Heuchera maxima*, Island Alum root, in the parentage. The shiny green leaves are large, reaching to 7" (18 cm) with the plants getting to 2' (61cm) in height. The lush growth will absorb leaf drop from the trees. This plant is a particularly fine companion for our valley oaks, as it needs little summer irrigation to thrive.

Several other plants to consider: *Iris douglasiana* (Douglas Iris). This is one of the easier native perennials to grow in home gardens. It forms dense clumps of dark green foliage with pale lavender to white blossoms in the spring.

*Mahonia repens* (Creeping Mahonia) is a good groundcover with brilliant yellow blossoms in the spring followed by blue berries in the fall. The leaves are holly-like, glossy green and attractive year-round. The plants will get to 2-3" by 4-5' over time. Best with occasional summer water.

*Ribes viburnifolium* (Evergreen Ribes). This is a low evergreen shrub that spreads by stem rooting. The stems are reddish, the leaves are dark green and round, and smell great when crushed. It is a fun plant to prune. It is native to the Channel Islands. Does best with little to no summer watering.

*Gaultheria shallon* is an evergreen shrub that can reach from 1 1/2 to 6 feet tall depending upon the amount of sunlight received. Pale pink urn shaped flowers in spring are followed by dark blue edible berries. Best in part shade where it is very drought tolerant.