

KNOW YOUR PLANT

One of my gardening mantras is “know your plant.” This idea began for me from one of my professors in graduate school. He used to say, “Before you begin any research project, *know your plant.*”

Anytime can be a great time to get to know your plants. Which perennials do I cut back for the summer? Which shrubs do I prune now? What do I do with my roses in summer? So here are some helpful ways to get to know your plants so *you* can start to answer your own questions like these.

We can learn the “nuts and bolts” information, like the mature size for a particular variety of *Pittosporum*, or whether or not a given perennial like sun or shade. One old favorite reference books is *The Sunset Western Garden Book*, a great informational resource about a plant's mature size, pruning, cold/heat tolerance, etc.

Local sources of information are always best. Try attending a free gardening class at your favorite nursery, or just go to the nursery and ask questions. Join your neighborhood garden club or community garden.

More and more gardeners are referencing the Internet. Beware that the Internet is worldwide and not geared toward San Diego County. Despite everyone’s obviously good intentions, someone in Florida telling you how they take care of your roses may not help you here in San Diego.

There are two lesser appreciated notions that I have found incredibly useful to “know your plant.” In all of my gardening classes and seminars I emphasize the importance of understanding (1) the **native habitat** of the plant – or *where a plant grows*, or *where we find it in nature*, and (2) the **growth habit** of the plant – or *how a plant grows*, or *what it does over one year*.

Putting the two notions together:
the goal for any type of gardening is
to reproduce the **native habitat** of your plant
to get the desired **growth habit**
...while having lots of fun!

The **native habitat** refers to where the plant is found nature and suggests

to us how to care for our plant. If a plant is native to the Midwest prairies, it will probably require lots of sun and moist but well-drained soil. If a plant is native to the understory of a tropical rainforest, it will likely perform best in the shade or as a houseplant with protection from cold winters.

The **growth habit** refers to what that plant does over one entire growing season. When does the plant flower? Does the plant retain its leaves all winter? When do the leaves fall off? Some plants experience a dormancy during summer.

Probably the most important thing to know about your plant is where do the new leaves originate? The ability to distinguish the youngest leaves from the oldest leaves gives you a powerful tool to assess the health of your plant. For instance, many plants normally shed some of their *oldest* leaves during the driest part of summer. Plants often shed the oldest, least valuable leaves during times of “stress”, and should not cause immediate alarm.

However, if the *youngest* leaves on a plant look discolored or deformed, something is definitely wrong. The youngest leaves should never look sick on a plant.

Know your plant!