



San Diego Chapter



November 3, 2021

Ms. Joanna Axelrod
Deputy City Manager
City of Escondido
201 North Broadway
Escondido, CA 92025

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RE: Native Plant Alternative to Proposed Plant Palette for the Escondido Creek Trail

Dear Ms. Axelrod,

We appreciate the City of Escondido’s efforts to improve the Escondido Creek Trail (ECT) and know how hard city staff has toiled to both win the \$8.5 million grant for trail improvements and advance grant implementation. This project offers a tremendous opportunity to change the way residents experience the ECT, and by extension the City of Escondido. We hope this is the first of many improvements to Escondido Creek that will provide safe and healthy opportunities for residents to recreate while enjoying nature within walking distance of their homes, a rare opportunity for many people and especially so for lower income residents.

We reviewed the proposed draft plant palette for the project and were disappointed with the limited number of California native plants on the list, especially trees native to Escondido. We suggest instead that the city implement a 100% native plant palette along the ECT, approximating the same species that would have been present before they were displaced by the concrete flood control channel, while enhancing with showy natives that produce flowers. To do so would have a multitude of benefits to the city maintenance staff, city residents and nearby nature. Native California plants are the most adapted to the site, use less water, many are fire resistant, require less maintenance, and support other native species.

A review of photos from before the concrete flood control channel was constructed shows the creek area to be primarily a riparian oak forest. Oaks are one of the most iconic species of California and especially southern California, but they are missing from the city’s proposed plant list. We are acutely aware that some native oaks have been threatened with extinction by non-native insect pests, but science supports the critical importance to plant young coast live oaks now and plant other oaks, such as the Engelmann oak, that appear more resistant to pests. The ECT provides an opportunity to create groves of native oaks supported by an understory of native plants, for residents to appreciate and love as they mature. Additionally, by planting oaks the city can contribute to cultural relevance that oaks have in southern California to local tribes and to California history. For more than 9,000 years before the arrival of Europeans, native peoples in the west lived lives enmeshed with the oaks. Oaks were important to human cultures for a myriad of purposes from food to decoration to basketry. (NRCS 2007) The city of Escondido has a unique opportunity at the ECT to pay homage to that history.

Sycamore trees, an iconic native species beloved by millions of Californians, are also missing from the list, even though the city’s adjacent Washington and Grape Day parks have beautiful specimen sycamores gracing their landscapes and providing much needed shade on hot summer days.

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Another reason that native plants are important in a project like this is because they provide food and shelter for pollinating insects and birds. Due to the use of pesticides and the reduction of native habitats, native insects that help to pollinate our native plants and agricultural crops are in decline (Garibaldi et al 2019). In a public project like the one you are proposing, using a native plant palette, with plants that bloom in the spring, summer, and fall, can make an important contribution to our local area by increasing the benefit of this corridor to pollinators. In a community like ours, where agriculture is an important part of our economy, making a positive contribution to pollinator health is a benefit that the public will understand and appreciate. This may also encourage Escondido residents to use native plants in their own yards once they see the beauty along the trail, further enhancing habitat for native pollinators and support to agriculture.

We believe part of the reason that native plants were dropped from the plant list might be thinking that the ECT must be maintained like a more traditional city park, for example, with plants actively trimmed and fertilized, where hedges are squared off, trees are shaped, and grounds are frequently blown to remove leaves. We suggest instead that the city create a more informal linear native garden along the ECT. Irrigation would be set to mimic the seasons and, in some cases, when plants have matured, turned off for good. Leaves are left on the ground to turn to mulch to reduce weeds, provide habitat and enrich the soil, and limbs only touched when there is a safety hazard. Fertilizer is never needed. Some native plants can be pruned to enhance blooming, others left to their own growth. A native plant palette would reduce the city's water and maintenance costs while enhancing resident's enjoyment of the trail. The feel of the trail would be more like Felicita Park, which is much beloved by Escondido residents. Moosa Creek nursery, a grower of native plants near Escondido, has provided a native plant list with alternatives to the city's list (attached). We recommend the city's contracted landscape architect choose native trees and plants that will do best for each location along the ECT.

The organizations on this letter have extensive experience growing and maintaining native plants. We can offer training to city staff, at no cost, on how to how to maintain native plants along the ECT. Additionally, we'd be happy to assist your team to provide guidance as the plants mature.

By using native plants instead of the non-natives on the draft plant palette, the City of Escondido will create something sacred that has been lost elsewhere in California, and in Escondido, while reducing its long-term maintenance costs. And by doing so, create a legacy that can live over 250 years, for the enjoyment of people and wildlife for centuries to come.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to working with you.

DocuSigned by:
Justin Daniel

Justin Daniel, President
California Native Plant Society – San Diego Chapter

DocuSigned by:
Laura Hunter

Laura Hunter, Chair
Sierra Club NCG Conservation Committee

DocuSigned by:
Rich Halsey

Richard Halsey, Director
California Chaparral Institute

Sincerely,

DocuSigned by:
Ann Van Leer

Ann Van Leer, Executive Director
The Escondido Creek Conservancy

DocuSigned by:
Richard Miller

Richard Miller
Chapter Director, Sierra Club

DocuSigned by:
Dan Silver

Dan Silver, Executive Director
Endangered Habitats League

Cc: Honorable Mayor and City Council

Recommendations from Moosa Creek Nursery¹

<u>Schedule</u>	<u>Suggested Replacement</u>	<u>Replacement Description (from the web)</u>
Arbutus x 'Marina'	Prunus ilicifolia	An evergreen shrub, producing edible cherries, with shiny and spiny toothed leaves similar in appearance to those of holly. It has small white flowers growing in clusters, similar in appearance to most members of the rose family, flowering from March to May. The fruit is sweet, with a very thin pulp around a large single stone.
Cercis canadensis	Cercis occidentalis	Beautiful in all seasons, this highly ornamental small tree is covered with masses of brilliant rose-purple blossoms in early spring. Rounded heart-shaped leaves emerge apple green, aging to blue green. Foliage provides excellent fall color. Smooth silvery-gray branches are picturesque in the winter landscape.
Lagerstroemia indica	Ceanothus 'Ray Hartman'	Beautiful large shrub rapidly grows 12 - 20 ft. tall and wide. Dark, shiny green foliage with large, medium blue spike-like flower clusters in the spring. Can be trained as a small tree or sheered to create a tall hedge. Especially adaptable, tolerating heat, some summer water and drought. Ceanothus provide habitat and forage for birds.
Laurus nobilis	Umbellularia californica	An evergreen tree native to coastal forests of California at elevations from 0-5000 feet. It is an attractive tree of variable size. Its bark has a color range from maple blonde to walnut brown. Leaves have a peppery aroma and are often used as a cooking spice. Flowers are small, white, yellow or yellowish green, and open in late winter and early spring. It is one of the few garden trees that tolerates serpentine or clay soils.
Olea europaea	Forestiera pubescens	Desert Olive works very well in a California garden. It's more cold hardy, more tolerant of bad soils, and a better bird plant. This little tree does well in San Diego.
Pyrus calleryana	Quercus engelmannii	The Engelmann Oak is a beautiful rare oak native to Southern California. Development has eliminated these oaks from the majority of its native range. Most remaining trees are located in San Diego County, with small remnant populations elsewhere. The trees are generally evergreen. They have an upright form when young, but older specimens often have spectacular gnarled trunks and winding branches.
Tipuana tipu	Parkensonia 'Desert Museum'	The Desert Museum palo verde is a fast-growing deciduous tree of medium size that develops an upright canopy habit. In contrast to other types of palo verde, this cultivar has thornless chartreuse-green stems and branches. Vast numbers of lemon-yellow flowers are produced each spring for a dramatic display.
Agave angustifolia 'Marginata'	Hesperoyucca whipplei	Hesperoyucca whipplei, the chaparral yucca, our Lord's candle, Spanish bayonet, Quixote yucca or foothill yucca, is a species of flowering plant.

¹ We recommend the city's contracted landscape architect choose native plants suitable for the creek channel.

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<u>Schedule</u>	<u>Suggested Replacement</u>	<u>Replacement Description (from the web)</u>
Agave attenuata	Agave shawii	Native to the immediate coast of Baja and San Diego. Leaves in a rosette on a short two ft. stem (caudex), and flowering stem is up to 12 feet in height. Outstanding as an accent in southern coastal gardens.
Buddleja davidii	Ceanothus 'Concha'	Ceanothus 'Concha' is one of the oldest and best Ceanothus hybrids. Ours are 4' high by 4' wide, and they grow larger in milder climates. This cultivar has deep blue flowers, is drought tolerant, and garden tolerant.
Lavandula angustifolia	Salvia 'Dara's Choice'	A lovely low-growing sage thought to be a cross between Black Sage (Salvia mellifera) and Creeping Sage (Salvia sonomensis). Bright green leaves give this sage a fresh appearance in the garden.
Chondropetalum tectorum	Juncus patens	This handsome evergreen rush provides a striking vertical accent, tall with grey-green to grey-blue foliage. Brownish-yellow, tassel-like flowers appear in the spring and early summer. Very adaptable, tolerating a wide range of conditions. Robust root systems are excellent for soil stabilization.
Myoporum parvifolium	Eriogonum 'Bruce Dickenson'	An inspiring selection of the California native common buckwheat that has significant appeal, particularly with erosion control, slope stabilization, and coverage. Exceptionally drought tolerant once established and basically carefree. Attracts butterflies.
Verbena rigida	Dudleya edulis, San Diego Dudleya	Dudleya edulis, also called Lady Fingers, is an aptly named succulent given its graceful, silvery-green cylindrical leaves. The slender tapering "fingers" radiate out from a central point, adding an unusual texture as well as color to the garden landscape. This native plant is truly local for San Diego.