



Cal Poly's Plant Communities

Because plant community boundaries are dynamic and variable, their classification is not always clear-cut. The classification system used in this book follows that of Holland and Keil (1996).

1. Grasslands

Grassland communities are dominated by native and introduced grasses and forbs (non-grassy herbs or wildflowers). The common herbaceous (non-woody) plants are annuals, perennials, or a mixture of the two. Grasslands sometimes form extensive prairies. They are one of California's most characteristic communities and cover about 10% of the state. California is sometimes referred to as the golden state because these large areas of grassland turn golden-brown during the dry summer months when the herbs die or go dormant. Grasslands cover most of the lower hillsides and valleys around the Cal Poly campus. Some view grasslands as monotonous and uniform; however, they are very diverse and often have beautiful wildflower displays in the spring.

Several environmental factors combine to favor development of grassland communities. Climatically, grasslands are typically found in areas of low and often irregular winter precipitation with hot, dry summers and long periods of drought. Grasslands occur on a variety of soil types, ranging from coarse and gravelly soils to very fine clays, but are most common on fine textured, deep, alluvial soils common to valley areas. Because most grassland soils are deep and fertile, they represent some of most productive agricultural soils in the state. As a result, many of California's grasslands have been given over to agriculture. Grassland soils generally have adequate winter and spring moisture to support grasses and other shallowly rooted herbaceous plants but are too dry to support oaks or other woody plants, although occasional trees and shrubs are sometimes found scattered in grasslands.