



Figure 1. A “tussocky” stand of Idaho fescue in Sonoma County. Photo: Ingrid Morken



Figure 2. A bioswale on the UC Davis campus composed of red fescue and other fescue species. Photo: Ingrid Morken

## SPECIES SPOTLIGHT: Fescue to the Rescue

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Figure 3. A valley oak and fescue landscape on the UC Davis campus (photo: Ingrid Morken) (above) and an Oregon white oak and California fescue landscape near the Bon Tempe Reservoir in Marin County (photo: Andrea Williams) (below).



Most of California’s native fescues (*Festuca* sp.) can be found in big “tussocky” stands in natural settings, sending slender stalks of spikelets to wave above dense clumps of fine leaves. Several fescues have made their way into gardens as lawn alternatives and ornamentals, and they also can commonly be found in bioswales. Idaho (or blue) fescue (*Festuca idahoensis*), red fescue (*F. rubra*), and California fescue (*F. californica*) are three of the most common in California and are commonly used in habitat restoration projects as well as in gardens and urban settings.

Idaho fescue is probably one of the most well-known natives; the tight blue bunches accent many a drought-tolerant landscape and, for example, can be found in some of the hottest, driest spots on Marin County’s Mt. Tamalpais. In the wild, it is a little looser and tends to be silver instead of blue and on occasion can be hard to tell from red fescue (*F. rubra*). A “tussocky” stand of Idaho fescue is depicted in Figure 1 at a remote site in Sonoma County.

Red fescue’s leaves are not red, but its flowering stalks often are. The fine leaf blades are rolled in long needles, and in most cases, they are a deep emerald green except when the species grows in drier spots with Idaho fescue and the two species are almost indistinguishable. Red fescue does particularly well on the coast. The most common cultivar ‘Molate’ is from Point Molate, just on the Richmond side of the Richmond–San Rafael Bridge in the San Francisco Bay Area, where the coastal grassland was nearly lost to development. Red fescue is commonly used in bioswales, as shown with a few other fescue species in Figure 2.

One of the largest and perhaps most striking native fescue is California fescue. Clusters of blue-green leaves grow as tall as 3 ft, and tussocks can reach 4 ft across; single flowering stalks reach 6 ft or more in the air. The plant keeps its flowering stalk and stays mostly green year-round, remaining visually interesting as the seasons turn. It is often found at moist edges of oak woodlands and forests, and the stands near Azalea Hill and along Bolinas-Fairfax Road in Marin County are some of the finest anywhere. Sometimes California fescue can be difficult to distinguish from the thirsty, fungus-harboring, invasive, and non-native tall fescue (*F. arundinacea*), but the coarse, broad, green blades and “tillering” spread of tall fescue are dead giveaways. On the UC Davis campus, an installed landscape of valley oak (*Quercus lobata*) and fescue is shown in Figure 3 above a landscape of natural Oregon white oak (*Quercus garryana*) and California fescue found near the Bon Tempe Reservoir on Marin Municipal Water District land. The fescue meadow on the UC Davis campus is drought tolerant and requires little mowing and much less maintenance than a traditional lawn.

