



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

California Buckwheat (August 24, 2019)

by Susan L. Cooker, UCCE Master Gardener

Once upon a time in California, Buckwheat plants, *Eriogonum spp.*, covered hillsides, ridges, and valleys. Today, habitat destruction has caused many types to become rarities. This is sad because with 125 buckwheat species, it is one of the most useful and diverse native plants for beneficial insects.

Buckwheat has a long blooming period with some types beginning in March and continuing into the fall, giving our gardens color when many other native plants have faded. The long-lived flowers range in color from yellows, whites, and creams, to pinks or reds, depending on species. The flowers are tiny but cluster in tight balls or flat heads atop long wands that branch at the tips. As the seed heads mature, they become tawny to deep brown, and are attractive in dried flower arrangements. The seeds are favorites of local wildlife. Best of all, most perennial types are evergreen.



Buckwheat is a very low water species. They may need none at all once established, even in our valley heat. At maturity, be careful giving them too much water, as it can kill them, but some types will tolerate extra water better than others. Most like a well-drained, sunny site, but in the valley some varieties may tolerate a bit of shade. Nurseries usually label site and water needs to help gardeners make good choices and there are informative sites for help online, including pictures of different types of buckweats. A couple of good sources are Calscape (calscape.org) or Calflora (Calflora.org).

Buckwheat plants are a keystone species for sagebrush scrub ecosystems similar to our valley. Because there are so many species, you can find cultivated forms which will grow in nearly any area of California. Some will make good groundcovers or mounding shrubs and one type will grow into a tall shrub. Here are some types that should be available in nurseries specializing in natives.

Eriogonum fasciculatum is considered a pioneer species, one that would arrive early on in a regrowth area after a disturbance. It has four recognized varieties and a wide area of distribution. It is commonly called California buckwheat and grows in some of the hottest, driest areas. It will tolerate some summer water better than some of the other buckwheat varieties. These are low mounding plants which spread widely to form large mats of evergreen foliage. Flowers appear in dense clusters ranging in color from pink to white and cream-colored. They make wonderful low bank stabilizers. Low growing forms of both Leafy Green Buckwheat and Interior California Buckwheat can be found in nurseries to use as spreading ground covers. However, like most buckweats, they are brittle and should not be used in high traffic areas. This species is the most important native source of honey in California, particularly attractive to numerous species of native bees and other pollinators.

E. grande is commonly known as redflower buckwheat. It originated in the Channel Islands and northwestern Baja California, but grows well in the valley with some afternoon shade and a little extra water than in its natural habitat. Flower color ranges from red to pink to cream, and its long summer bloom period makes it especially attractive to pollinators. It can be used as an understory plant, in rock gardens, and as an edger/ground cover. There are three recognized varieties in the wild, but *Var. rubescens* is the most commonly available form found in nurseries.



If a large landscape bush is needed, try *E. giganteum*; Saint Catherine's Lace. Depending on the cultivar, it can grow from two to nine feet tall and about four feet wide. It's been named an 'All-Star' plant by UC Davis

arboretum and is very adaptable as to site. It grows quickly and adapts to our hot valley summers. It is clay soil tolerant with adequate drainage. Its large white flower heads look lacy as the common name implies. Once flowers are dead-headed, the plant may look a bit sparse until warmer temperatures push out new white to soft gray-green leaves in abundance.

Look for pictures of Buckwheats on the web to get a better idea of how they can fit into your landscape and their commercial availability. Adding one or two into the home garden will bring an abundance of bees and butterflies to the garden and benefit the ecosystem. They are easy, attractive, hardworking and rewarding growers, and a valuable addition to our water-wise Central Valley gardens.

Are you interested in becoming a Master Gardener? The UC Master Gardener program of Tulare/Kings Counties is recruiting! Our next class runs January 22 through June 10. Applications will be available online in August and must be turned in by October 30. We will be holding a mandatory orientation on Wed., Oct 9 @ 3:00 to share what the training course and the volunteer commitment entail. Please call our office (684-3343) with any questions...we look forward to talking with all interested gardeners! Check us out at: https://ucanr.edu/sites/UC_Master_Gardeners/Become_a_Master_Gardener/

The UCCE Master Gardeners will be available to answer your gardening questions at the following venues in August:

- Visalia Farmers' Market – Every Saturday morning (8-11 am), Sears parking lot, Mooney Blvd.
- Hanford "Thursday Night Marketplace" – 2nd Thursday (5:30 – 9:00 pm) through October.
- Kings Co Fruit and Veggie Fest (Sep 7)
- Tulare County Employee Health Fair (Sep 26)
- Eagle Mountain Employee Health Fair (Oct 3)

*For answers to all your home gardening questions, call the Master Gardeners in Tulare County at (559) 684-3325, Tuesdays and Thursdays between 9:30 and 11:30 am; or Kings County at (559) 852-2736, Thursday Only, 9:30-11:30 a.m; or visit our website to search past articles, find links to UC gardening information, or to email us with your questions: http://ucanr.edu/sites/UC_Master_Gardeners/
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