

## The Beauty and Benefits of Native Shrubs

By Rachel Oppedahl

Gardeners have long used shrubs in the landscape to define space, line walkways, create outdoor "rooms" and windbreaks, and provide privacy, not to mention the joys of flowers, fragrance and fall color.

For the first few years I made the Sierra foothills home, I tried to recapture the gardens of my Bay Area childhood by planting shrubs like camellias, hydrangeas, and other exotic beauties. They all either fried in the summer heat, turned to black mush after a hard frost, or simply demanded way too much water to thrive.

I wised up eventually by looking to native shrubs to provide color, scent, design, and privacy. Contrary to what many people think, natives offer all of that. And because many of California's native shrubs hail from coastal chaparral habitats or the Sierra foothills, they have evolved to get by on very little water during the brutally long, hot, dry summers there. Plus, native shrubs provide the most sustainable source of food (nectar and berries), nesting places and protective cover for birds, bees, butterflies and other local wildlife. I like the The National Wildlife Federation's suggestion of planting a hedgerow of native shrubs that offers visual variety in the garden, plus food and cover for wildlife. An example might be two evergreens, one nectar- and one berry-producing shrub.

The list of attractive, low maintenance, water-wise and wildlife-friendly native shrubs is long and diverse, but here are some of the best for the foothills. Unless otherwise noted, they are sun lovers.

**California Lilac** (*ceanothus*). Clouds of powder to cobalt blue flowers reminiscent of miniature lilacs cover this shrub in spring. California lilac actually has varieties that range from groundcovers to shrubs more than 10-feet high and wide. Most are evergreen. The flowers have an unusual but pleasant scent, but you might not get a chance to sniff them because this shrub is a bee magnet! Once established, most prefer little or no water in summer.

**Matilija Poppy** (*romneya coulteri*). This one is a showstopper. A dense, rounded shrub to 8 feet high and with greyish green leaves, matilija poppy has huge, white flowers with golden stamens in the center. The blooms are lightly scented and last from late spring through summer.

**Flannel Bush** (*Fremontodendron*). A large, open shrub, flannel bush sports bright yellow, saucer-shaped flowers from spring to early summer. Fast growing, it can reach more than 20 feet high and 12 feet wide. It is extremely drought tolerant. After flowering, it produces seedpods that some people find unsightly, so situate it behind other bushes.

Several more outstanding native shrubs that flower and/or produce berries are hollyleaf redberry, coffee berry, Pacific ninebark, and Western redbud. Because these shrubs are found most often near streams, they are happiest with a little more summer water (and part shade) than more drought-tolerant natives.

The California Native Plant Society's website: ([www.cnps.org](http://www.cnps.org)) has an extensive library of native shrubs. It offers plenty of useful detail about each plant, including size and growing habit; leaf, flower and berry appearance; suggested location in the landscape; where it is typically found in the wild; and more. The Sierra Foothills Chapter of CNPS has a website, ([www.sierrafoothillscnps.org](http://www.sierrafoothillscnps.org)), with articles about deer-resistant plants for our area, native plants for butterfly gardens, tips for planting under oaks, starting native plants from seed, and more. Our local chapter of CNPS also holds two plant sales a year (spring and fall), and is a great resource for finding native plants.

UC Davis also has several websites that can help you research native shrubs: California Garden Web (<http://cagardenweb.ucanr.edu>); and Arboretum All Stars ([http://arboretum.ucdavis.edu/plant\\_search.aspx](http://arboretum.ucdavis.edu/plant_search.aspx))

Choosing native shrubs over high-maintenance exotics becomes a no brainer the more gardeners learn about their beauty and benefits in the landscape.

*Rachel Oppedahl is a University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener of Tuolumne County.*