



Carpenteria Californica

by Rosie Bonar, UCCE Master Gardener

Even though we are currently having a wet winter in 2017, we are still living in drought conditions in the San Joaquin Valley. Scientific studies show the level of groundwater in the San Joaquin Valley has steadily dropped through the last several years, and there's no doubt that temperatures are rising. With this realization, we still need to conserve water in our landscapes by choosing plants that are drought-resistant.

Last summer, we looked around and found that our home landscapes were suffering. We need to make changes. As we learn to accept that some of our favorite shrubs do not do well in the drought, we should look for replacement plants that are just as pleasing to our traditional landscape eye. One such possibility is *Carpenteria californica*.

History and location:

Carpenteria californica, or Bush Anemone, is one of California's loveliest, but rarest shrubs. It is native to the dry granite ridges of the foothills in chaparral and oak woodlands of the southern Sierra Nevada near Fresno. It only occurs naturally in seven sites in Fresno and Madera Counties between 1000 to 5000 feet in elevation and between the San Joaquin and Kings Rivers. It was first discovered in the 1840's by the explorer J. Charles Fremont and was named for an American botanist and physician, William M. Carpenter. It was not offered for commercial purposes until the 1980's.

Appearance:

Carpenteria californica is an evergreen shrub in the hydrangea family. It is closely related to the mock-orange genus. Common names include tree anemone and bush anemone. It can reach about 6 feet tall and 3 feet wide. It has thick, oblong leaves that can be 3 to 4 inches long. The leaves are opposite each other, glossy, and dark green on top and whitish on the bottom. The leaves make a lovely backdrop for the shrub's fragrant white 2-inch flowers. It blooms from May through July, with as many as 20 blooms at the end of its branches. In keeping with its common name, (Bush anemone) the shrub has flat, anemone-like petals which encase hundreds of bright yellow stamens. Its fruit contains a number of seeds in a leathery cone-shaped pod. It has a somewhat floppy habit and may benefit from being planted in a grouping rather than singly. It produces suckers, which are good if you want it to spread, but need to be controlled if you don't.

Garden use:

Carpenteria californica can be used in our gardens in places that we traditionally would have planted a camellia. It is rather tall, evergreen, and has white flowers just like the camellia. However, unlike camellias, they do not require a lot of



water. Bush anemones thrive in well-drained soil and can survive our summer dryness, whereas camellias like moist soil and have to be irrigated during the summer heat.

Planting:

Like most natives, it is best to plant *Carpenteria californica* in the fall. They like a sheltered area with partial shade or morning sun. The shrub needs good drainage. It is best to create this good drainage at the time of planting by adding soil amendments.

Because this California native comes from a habitat where summers are long, hot and dry, it can survive on very little water once established. However, it will need to have adequate water until it is established. Inadequate watering may result in slower growth and fewer flowers. Be sure to use plenty of mulch. Once the plant is established, cut back on the frequency of watering, so that the top couple inches of soil become fairly dry between irrigations. It is best to use drip irrigation; as overhead watering can cause fungal problems on the plant's foliage. The bottom line is that more bush anemones perish from over-watering than lack of moisture. Even though it is drought tolerant, its appearance is improved with some summer water. In the garden this shrub would be nice against a fence or in a group. Pinch the tips and prune lightly to shape it and keep it looking attractive.

Problems & Diseases:

According to the University of California's "Pests of Landscape Trees and Shrubs," if the shrub develops sticky honey dew, blackish sooty mold, or whitish cast skins and/or its leaves curl and distort, the probable cause is aphids. Inspect new growth regularly and hose off the aphids forcefully with water. Apply insecticidal soap or oil before damage occurs. If you find a thickening of the plant's twigs and/or its shoots are dead or distorted, it could be pit-making pittosporum scale, which are brown to white insects 1/8-inch long. This is an occasional problem with no known management.

Value in the Garden:

Carpenteria californica is a beautiful ornamental, displaying lush, white, sweetly scented blooms over several spring and summer months. As a California native, it is well adapted to our hot dry summers. The bush anemone is also deer resistant. It is beautiful planted as a specimen among a group of conifers or even oaks, as it is resistant to oak root fungus.

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