



Bladderpod: A Plant for the New California Landscape

by Anne Skinner, UC Master Gardener

Hot summer days are the perfect time to review magazines, books, TV shows, and YouTube videos to plan landscaping changes to make in the upcoming months. In the fall, the cooler nights and shorter days cause less stress on new transplants and winter rains will help them establish. Are you looking for a hardy plant that will survive the child who wants to help in the garden, but then will forget to water? Bladderpod (*Peritoma arborea*) is the perfect choice.



Bladderpod flower

Bladderpod is a member of the Cleomaceae (Spiderflower) family and is a California native. It was previously called *Isomeris arborea* and *Cleome isomeris*. In addition to bladderpod, other common names are burrofat and California Cleome.

Bladderpod is found from Baja California to as far north as Fresno, growing on hilly terrain, desert washes, coastal bluffs and disturbed areas. It is an evergreen shrub that grows 2-4 feet tall. Its blue-green leaves give off a pungent odor when disturbed. The odor is thought to discourage insects from eating the leaves. It is listed as deer resistant. The yellow flowers bloom for much of the year and are a source of pollen for bees. The shrub is a source of cover, seeds and nectar for birds, such as hummingbirds. The fruits, shaped much like a bladder, contain 5-25 seeds. Although it is not invasive, seedlings are common as the pods dry and open.



Bladderpod seedpod

It has been divided into varieties based on the shape of the pod. In the foothills of the Southern San Joaquin Valley, the most common variety is *globosa*, relating to its spherical pods. Other varieties are *angustata* with spindle shaped pods and *arborea* with egg shaped pods.

Getting established

The bladderpod is drought tolerant. It has been described as “resenting watering.” Seeds planted in deep soils can grow with spring rain alone. Potted plants may require minimal water depending on the planting date. I have watered my transplants when I plant them on an absolutely dry slope and they have survived on what winter rain they received. The plants are creating abundant seed pods. Bladderpod is tolerant of alkaline soils and temperatures from below freezing to over 100 degrees. It has no known disease problems.



Bladderpod

Seedlings can be planted with 4-6 foot spacing. Weed control while the seedlings are getting established is advisable. Bladderpod is suitable for use near Central Valley oaks but avoid planting them under the oak canopy or within ten feet of the mature tree trunk. Bladderpod is fire resistant, meaning the plant does not readily ignite from flames and does not significantly contribute to the fuel and fire's intensity.

Why are deep soil and fall planting suggested for such a low water plant?

Many native plants survive by establishing deep tap roots. This is a long, thick root going deep into the soil. The tap root allows the plant to use water deep in the soil and store food reserves, making it more resilient in drought conditions. The deep root is also useful for soil retention and limited hillside stabilization. Fall planting allows the roots to establish well in advance of the next hot season.

Landscaping to match the climate and native plant requirements

California's Central Valley has a variable Mediterranean climate, with winter precipitation and recurring droughts. Planning our landscaping to match these conditions is a challenge. Using plants native to California is one solution, but it is important to match the conditions under which the plant would normally be found. Native plants are resilient, but also very selective about their environment. Not all native plants are drought tolerant. When planning any garden, it is advisable to research the location the plant is normally found and group plants with the same water, soil, and light requirements together. If you have a place in the garden with no irrigation water, bladderpod will be right at home.

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