



Monkey Flower: A drought-tolerant addition to your garden

by Pam Wallace, UC Master Gardener

As we enter yet another year of drought, we can expect to experience a tightening of restrictions on water use this summer. As gardeners, we should consider it our responsibility to pick plants that are low water users. Not only will the environment appreciate this, but our wallets as well, since most of us are now on water meters. Personally, I plan to “spend” most of my water allotment on my trees because I value their shade — and I have spent many years growing them.

With this in mind, I’ve started looking at California native plants that are more adaptable to our hot, dry summers and cooler winters. Monkeyflowers (*Mimulus* species) are a showy California native plant that fits that bill.

Bush monkeyflower, or sticky monkeyflower (also spelled monkey flower), are erect or sprawling woody perennial plants. They get their name from the funnel-shaped, two-lipped flowers that are said to resemble grinning monkey faces.

Monkeyflowers bloom in spring and summer and have exuberant 1-2 inch blossoms that range in color from white to yellow, orange, or red. They flower better in full sun but will tolerate part or even full shade. The 1 to 3-inch leaves range in color from green to silver, and can sometimes be sticky and hairy. Monkeyflower is native to southwestern North America, from southwestern Oregon and south through most of California.

It’s important to be careful when choosing a monkeyflower species for your yard because some varieties are native to the coastal areas and aren’t as drought tolerant. The *Mimulus diplacus* species is the drought-tolerant woody perennial you should you choose.

These varieties that prefer dry rocky slopes in their natural habitat are a better choice for the San Joaquin Valley growing conditions. *Mimulus aurantiacus* is also good for rock gardens, full sun, and summer-dry spots, once established. They range from 1 to 4 feet tall and have displays of blossoms 1 to 2 inches wide. They can be summer deciduous (go dormant and are dead-looking in harsh summers and then return to form with the rains). *Mimulus alcyinus*, Rock Monkeyflower, sports light yellow flowers, and as its name suggests, grows in rocky crevices and outcroppings along the base of the Sierras from Fresno to Kern counties.



Mimulus puniceus, Bert's Raspberry, has large raspberry-colored flowers and tolerates some drought, although it does prefer some summer water. I've planted one in a very hot, dry area that doesn't have good sprinkler coverage, and it has thrived for two years.

When I originally planted it, I dug the hole, put the plant in, covered with soil and mulch, and walked away from it. I did not water it when I planted it because the soil was already moist and too much water can kill these plants.

Monkeyflowers appreciate the deadheading of old flowers. They tolerate light or heavy pruning. My plant is a sprawler, and had become quite woody and leggy, so this winter, I cut it back drastically. As of this writing in April, it has leafed out and is already blooming.

Bush monkeyflower can reach 3 to 4 feet in size although some species have a more sprawling growth habit. They are deer-tolerant and great additions to a bird garden. They also naturally attract both hummingbirds and butterflies.

Jazz up mixed borders, rock gardens, or containers with a combination of monkeyflowers and other plants that thrive in our Mediterranean climate. Try mixing them with ceanothus, salvia, penstemon, cistus, rosemary, or lavender.

Soften the bold textures of succulents, such as the larger aeonium, aloes, and agaves, with monkeyflowers. Some of the low-growing, recumbent bush monkeyflowers are effective spilling over retaining walls.

Water regularly until the plant is established, unless you are willing to take a chance, like I did, and just let it be. Then step back and let nature provide you with an easy-care plant that asks little in return for its cheerful flowers.

Monkeyflower can be susceptible to leaf spots, powdery mildew, or rusts, especially if they are over-watered, so it is vital to provide good drainage when planting.

When transplanting from the nursery container, dig a hole twice as wide as the size as the pot and a few inches deeper. Add compost to the native soil, layer a few inches in the bottom of the hole, and then plant, making sure the crown of the plant stays at the same soil level, or an inch or two higher than it was in the pot.

For more information about pests and disorders of monkeyflower, visit <http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/GARDEN/PLANTS/monkeyflower.html>.

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