

Magnificent Manzanita

by Kathi Joye

The reddish bark of the manzanita is distinctive and eye-catching, particularly when the maroon of the living wood is entwined with the grey of dead wood and framed by olive-colored evergreen leaves. Add dollops of snow on top and manzanita is quite a winter beauty. Actually, manzanita is magnificent looking throughout all of the Sierra seasons.

In late winter to early spring, manzanita is decorated with many hanging clusters of bell-shaped flowers that range from white to pink in color. Apple-shaped fruits that are a light reddish-brown appear in summer and ripen in late summer to fall. The trunk and branches form interesting shapes and are often used in decorations. And even in the heat of summer, manzanitas retain healthy greenery.

There are over 40 species of *Arctostaphylos spp.* (manzanita) that are native to California. These range from ground covers to large shrubs throughout the various climate zones found in California. Two species that are commonly found in Tuolumne County are Whiteleaf Manzanita (*Arctostaphylos viscida*) and Greenleaf Manzanita (*Arctostaphylos patula*). Whiteleaf Manzanita ranges from 500-5000 feet in elevation and can grow up to 13 feet in height. The leaves are erect on the branches and start off sticky, becoming smooth later. Greenleaf Manzanita is found at higher elevations (2,000-11,000 feet) and typically, is not as large, growing up to 7 feet tall. Its leaves are described as drooping. Manzanita belongs to the Heath family (Ericaceae) which includes rhododendrons and madrones.

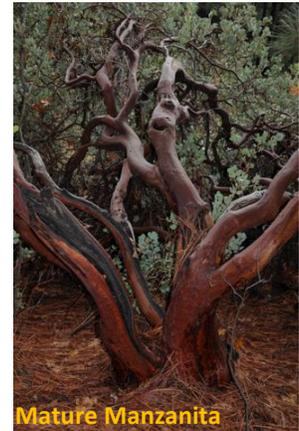


Manzanita berries

The genus name *Arctostaphylos* is Greek for 'bear berries'. This is an apt name as black bears are regular consumers of manzanita berries. Hiking on trails, I often find bear scat chockfull of these red-brown fruits. Other mammals, as well as birds, eat the fruits of the plant. Stands of manzanita provide shelter for birds, such as California quail, and small mammals. Manzanita flowers attract hummingbirds, bees and other beneficial insects.

Native Americans had many uses for manzanita. When chewed, manzanita leaves could aid nausea and upset stomachs, whereas tea made from the leaves helped with diarrhea. Soaked leaves were used as a poultice to reduce the discomfort associated with poison oak rashes. Native Americans ate raw and dried berries and would also use these fruits to make cider.

Another magnificent aspect of manzanita is that, despite the harsh environments that they often inhabit, they are long-lived with some of the larger species growing for more than 100 years. Their success is related to their association with other members of their own community and an underground symbiotic relationship (mutually beneficial) with one or more types of mycorrhiza. These root fungi break down organic material making nutrients available and act to increase the surface area of the root systems of the plants in the community. This dramatically increases the plants' abilities to absorb water and minerals. Mycorrhizae also improve the plant



Mature Manzanita



Manzanita berries in bear scat.

community's soil by supporting beneficial soil organisms while inhibiting those that can cause disease as well as suppressing weed growth. As a result of this special relationship, manzanita and other natives are able to tolerate our long, hot, dry summers and are able to grow in poorer quality soils.



Although manzanitas are austere in their beauty and vital to their native communities, they are often missing from planned landscapes. Property owners frequently remove native stands of manzanita to reduce fire fuel loads, clear areas for homes and views or create space for non-native gardens. Yet manzanitas can be used as ground cover or to form hedgerows or as accents in a native garden or natural landscaping.

If you plan on adding a magnificent manzanita to enhance your landscape, keep in mind that they prefer full sun and acidic to neutral soils that are well-drained. Considering their mycorrhizal relationships, manzanitas do not tolerate summer water or fertilizer; as a result, they do not do well if planted with ornamental, non-native plants that do require more maintenance. Some hybrid California manzanitas are more tolerant of non-native gardens but these varieties do not share some of the same survival characteristics as native species and also do not live as long. Local nurseries can help you choose the type of manzanita that will suit your site and purpose.

Whether you decide to include these beautiful plants in a native garden or just enjoy their beauty in the wild, they are an integral part of the magnificent flora of the Sierra Nevada landscape.