



California Poppies

by Sue Rideout, UC Master Gardener

Hillsides, yards, and highway banks are now ablaze with the orange and yellow glory of California Poppies (*Eschscholzia californica*). They were named for Dr. Johann Friedrich Eschscholz who was a doctor-naturalist for a Russian expedition dropping anchor in San Francisco Bay in 1815 where poppies covered the hills. The California poppy was designated our state flower in 1890.



Native from Oregon to Baja, California poppies bloom from February to mid-summer, though April and May are the best times for mass viewings. The Antelope Valley California Poppy Reserve in north Los Angeles County blazes with over 1700 acres of poppies starting in early April. The hills east of Gorman near Grapevine are also covered with their orange glory. On a smaller scale, country roadsides and hillsides all over the state burst into bloom. The poppies make their greatest show on grazed hillsides because the cattle avoid eating these bitter plants and eliminate most of their competition. And many gardeners have a spot for California poppies in their yards.

California poppies are a short-lived perennial wildflower in the Papaveraceae family. They reseed so readily that many consider them annuals which they are in cooler climates. Their lacy leaves are blue-green and finely divided. The plants are robust, almost indestructible, and grow up to 2 feet tall. The long-lasting flowers consist of four satiny orange or deep yellow petals forming a cup 2 to 3 inches in diameter. The blooms close at night and in cold cloudy weather. These poppies are true Californians—they love the sun!

There are also hybrid garden forms of the California poppy with yellow, pink, red, cream or white blossoms. 'Mission bells' and 'Ballerina' have semi-double flowers, some with frilled or fluted petals. When they reseed, garden forms tend to revert to yellow or orange.

California poppies are easy to grow with the right conditions. Seeds should be directly sown where they are to grow; the plants do not transplant well because of their deep taproots. They prefer a well-drained soil in full sun. If the soil is heavy, working in some sand before seeding will improve their performance. In the Central Valley seeding should be done in the fall and given some moisture if there is no rain. My poppies reseed themselves every year with no problem. In fact they have reseeded themselves in neighbors' yards so the street is lined with poppies! The poppies do not seem to be terribly invasive however because they tend to reseed in bare, dry spots and not in lawns. They also do not make good container plants.

California poppies need little water; they will grow and bloom with the winter rains and then go dormant when it becomes dry in the summer. Mine grow in a spot which receives no summer water, but I have discovered that if I give them a few drinks of water, they will bloom well into summer. Another way to extend the blossom season is to cut off the seed pods before they fully develop, but be sure to leave a few to seed next year's plants. The seed pods burst with an audible snap when they are mature and scatter the seeds. If you want to save seeds for a friend or another area, pick off some pods before they are completely mature and put them in a dry container.



California poppies are a joy to see, whether wild on the hills and roadsides or in our gardens, so don't miss this simple pleasure in the landscape.

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