

# Mastering Your Garden

## Matilija Poppies

By Wes Janssen, UCCE Master Gardener

December of 1890. After a few years of friendly disagreement over three nominated candidates, the California State Floral Society made its selection for a proposed official state flower. The California Legislature doesn't seem to have considered the matter as urgent, passing a bill in 1903 that, when signed by Governor George Pardee, conferred that honor on *Eschscholzia californica*, the California poppy. Most agreed, and most still do: it was the obvious choice.

There were dissenters. A minority had advocated for Coulter's Matilija Poppy, *Romneya coulteri*. The plant takes its common name from Chief Matilija of the Chumash peoples of present-day Santa Barbara and Ventura counties and the Channel Islands. Most commonly known as Matilija Poppy, the perennial plant is also called California Tree Poppy, as the flower stems are often seven to nine feet tall. These impressive natives occur from the western slopes of Southern California's mountain ranges to the Pacific coast, from Santa Barbara southward into northern Baja California. It grows below 4,000 feet, in dry chaparral and coastal sage scrub plant communities. The flowers are four to nine inches across—the largest flowers of any California native—having crinkled, white crepe-paper-like petals surrounding a puffball of yellow stamens. This large diameter, white petal display with rounded yellow center lends the plant yet another common name—the less than artful moniker—Fried Egg Plant. Sunny side up. The stems and leaves are glaucous (blue-gray green). The flowers will attract bees, birds, and butterflies.

Matilija poppies famously require two things of the gardener: (1) patience and (2) space. Patience, because the plant so dislikes being transplanted that, unless you are lucky, you will lose some before one 'takes.' If at first you don't succeed, try again; an initial persistence can lead to wonderful outcomes. These plants

are prohibitively difficult to propagate from seed, so propagation is typically done by carefully selecting segments of rhizome in November or December. It is recommended that you buy plants in one-gallon containers from a nursery that provides native plants. Select the healthiest plants and be careful not to disturb the roots when planting. The easiest way to do that is to cut off the bottom of the pot and then cut the pot down the sides, once in the planting hole, to remove. Newly transplanted Matilija poppies need to be watered until established. However once established your patience and resolve will be rewarded. These plants will need no supplemental watering and will flower spectacularly through each spring and early summer.

Space is a second requirement because once established Matilija poppies will demand plenty of three-dimensional space. Slowly, but constantly spreading rhizomes will in time result in a mass of poppies that is not only tall, but will have a rather large footprint. Select your planting site accordingly. If the day comes that you must rein in your beautiful mass, try propagating from the rhizomes you remove. Give them to friends, perhaps.

Companion plantings will have to be able to hold their own, visually and otherwise, and must have a similar aversion to significant supplemental watering. Give consideration to another stunning San Diego County native, *Fremontodendron californicum*, California flannelbush. Other companion candidates include the larger manzanita species.

Although a perennial, after flowering the plant will look much less impressive in the dry heat of late summer and early fall. It is best to cut back the plant to about six inches above ground at this time, and to chop up the cuttings for a perfect mulch around the plants.



Photo: Linda Genis