NATIVE PLANTS for the Garden

The Many Benefits of BUCKWEATS

by Jennifer Jewell

After a hot summer, followed by a cold then warm but very dry winter – we are all perhaps anxious and interested in what the summer ahead will bring. By the looks of my garden, it is sure to bring the bloom of my garden’s buckwheats – the bright yellow of the tidy green mounds of sulphur buckwheat is just about to pop open. Without having received any supplemental water at all since last October.

As an avid gardener, I want a lovely, lively garden, but I don’t want to pretend I live in another place with a different climate. So I must be resourceful and expand my knowledge of good garden plants. Judiciously chosen native and climate-appropriate plants can and do make all the difference. For dramatic color and the durability to thrive in my garden, the wild native buckwheats are among my favorites.

Wild buckwheats are eye-catching, sometimes acid yellow, fuchsia pink, or creamy white, low-lying clouds of bloom that you might see on drives, hikes, and in gardens from June through October across the American West. Tenacious native dryland plants, buckwheats thrive in exposed locations on slim soils. They dot high plains and mountain meadows, desert roadsides and rocky slopes, all the while looking bright and appealing in foliage, flower, or gone to seed.

Among the many benefits of buckwheats, these enthusiastic plants are important food sources for pollinators, especially in the late summer months when other flowering plants have retreated to dormancy in the dry heat. Buckwheats reliably attract a whole symphony of pollinators including native bees, wasps, flies, butterflies, beetles, and birds.

Besides being a pleasure to meet on the trail, with good sun and not too much water many buckwheats adapt easily to large or small garden settings.

BOTANY Botanists seem to have as strong an affinity for Eriogonum as gardeners and native plant enthusiasts. The genus offers rich diversity, complex botanical characteristics and a history of “rapid evolution in arid regions of western North America,” according to Dr. James Reveal, an international Eriogonum expert. He writes that, “As a native North American genus, Eriogonum is second only to Penstemon. Ecologically, species of Eriogonum occur from the seashore to the highest mountains in the United States. They are among the last plants seen atop the Sierra Nevada and on the ‘outskirts’ of Badwater in Death Valley. The United States Department of the Interior currently lists some as endangered or threatened species. Some species tend to be weedy, and some of the annual species are aggressively so.”
The genus *Eriogonum* belongs to the so-called “knot-weed” family, Polygonaceae. Edible buckwheat (*Fagopyrum esculentum*) is an important food crop in the same family. While species of *Eriogonum* do occur elsewhere, the genus is strongly associated with the West. *The Jepson Manual: Higher Plants of California* says that around 250 species occur in California.

With weediness of some species in mind, home gardeners are advised to be careful when choosing eriogonums in order to avoid accidentally releasing a weed into surrounding wildlands or corrupting the genetics of native *Eriogonum* populations in your area.

**CARE AND CULTIVATION**

As illustrated by their native habitats, eriogonums are at their best in lean, well-draining soil and full sun. Dryland plant experts often recommend mulching buckwheats with gravel or mixing gravel in the top few inches of soil around their crowns. They resent being overwatered, especially around their crowns.

Northern California plantsman and garden designer, John Whittlesey recommends pairing buckwheats with “plants they might be found with it in the wild, or those that will enjoy similar conditions: coyote mint (*Monardella sp.*), Penstemon, Lupine, Nepeta, Achillea, Teucrium, dwarf English lavenders, asters, and native bunch grasses.”

Good species of *Eriogonum* for gardens include mid-size and striking yellow *Eriogonum umbellatum* var. *dumosum* ‘Shasta Sulphur’: strongly vertical with needle-like foliage and creamy white-blossoms *E. fasciculatum* (California buckwheat); *E. giganteum* (St. Catherine’s Lace), which is a large (up to six feet by six feet) specimen with silver-white foliage and much broader, white flower heads; and *E. grande var. rubescens*, a low variety with silvery foliage and warm pink flowers.

**FURTHER RESOURCES**

- The Eriogonum Society  [www.eriogonum.org](http://www.eriogonum.org)
- Floral Native Nursery, Chico, CA  [www.floralnativenursery.com](http://www.floralnativenursery.com)
- Las Piñitas Nursery, Escondido and Santa Margarita  [www.laspiltas.com](http://www.laspiltas.com)
- Rebecca Lance, Granite Gardens Rare Plants, Sonora, CA
  - [http://granitegardensrareplants.com](http://granitegardensrareplants.com)
- Sunscapes Rare Plant Nursery, Pueblo, CO  [www.sunscapes.net](http://www.sunscapes.net)
- Jennifer Jewell  [jewellgarden.com](http://jewellgarden.com)

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