The California Poppy

by Michelle Le Strange, UC Master Gardener Advisor

California's state flower is the bright orange California poppy (Eschscholzia californica). It was selected over the Mariposa lily (genus Calochortus) and the Matilija poppy (Romneya coulteri) by the CA State Floral Society in Dec 1890, with state legislators making it official in 1903. Its golden blooms were deemed a fitting symbol for the Golden State.

Legends and Facts: The CA poppy was botanically named for a German surgeon and botanist (Johann Friedrich von Eschscholtz) traveling with a Russian expedition that dropped anchor in San Francisco Bay in 1815, when hillsides were covered in poppies. Early Spanish settlers called the flower "copa del ora" (cup of gold) after the legend that the orange petals, turned to gold and filled the soil with the precious metal.

It turns out that the CA poppy is native to grassy and open areas from sea level to 6,500 feet altitude throughout California, but its range also extends to Oregon, southern Washington, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Sonora Mexico and northwest Baja California.

Plants grow 2-24 inches tall, with branching, divided, blue-green foliage. Flowers are solitary on long stems, silky-textured, with four distinctly large petals. Petal color ranges from yellow to orange, and flowering is from February to September. Flowers close at night and on cloudy, overcast days. The fruit is a slender capsule, which splits in two to release the numerous small black or dark brown seeds. It is perennial in mild parts of its native range, and annual in colder climates; growth is best in full sun and sandy, well-drained, poor soil.

The CA poppy grows well in disturbed areas and often recolonizes after fires. In addition to being planted for horticulture, revegetation, and highway beautification, it often colonizes along roadsides and other disturbed areas. It is drought-tolerant, self-seeding, and easy to grow in gardens. It can't be beat for naturalizing on sunny hillsides, country gardens, or in dry fields, but perhaps is not the best choice for manicured landscaped beds viewed up close, unless the garden style is CA natives and drought tolerant plants.

A common myth associated with the plant is that cutting or otherwise damaging the CA poppy is illegal because it is a state flower. There is no such law. However, there is a state law that makes it a misdemeanor to cut or remove any flower, tree, shrub or other plant growing on state or county highways, with an exception for authorized government employees and contractors (CA Penal Code Section 384a).

Uses: Besides floral beauty, CA poppy leaves were used medicinally by Native Americans, and the pollen was used cosmetically; seeds are used in cooking. Extract from the CA poppy can act as a mild sedative, but contains a completely different class of alkaloids from the opium poppy.

Cultivars: Horticulturalists have produced numerous cultivars with various petal colors and blossom and stem forms. These typically do not breed true on reseeding, in other words they revert back to orange-yellow flowers. Some of the more common varieties listed in Sunset's Western Garden Book include:

'Apricot Flambeau' with fiery shades of lemon, cream and apricot with intense, flame colored coral edges and smoky, grey-green foliage.
The 'Ballerina' series has frilly, double flowers in shades of yellow, orange, rose and scarlet.
'Carmine King' offers flowers in shades of deep pink with white centers.
'Champagne & Roses' is a Thompson and Morgan introduction, with fluted flowers in shades of pink, from champagne to deep rose. The backs of the pale petals are a darker pink giving a two-tone effect.
'Golden Tears' bears single golden yellow blooms on trailing stems to 2 ft. long.
'Inferno' offers orange scarlet blooms.
'Mission Bells' is a semi-double mix of pastel yellow, pink and orange with lightly ruffled petals.
Names like 'Cherry Ripe', 'Milky White', and 'Purple Cap' describe flower color.
'Orange King' is an improved variety of the species with earlier, longer lasting flowers of glowing orange.
'Thai Silk Mix' is a dwarf strain with 1½ inch ruffled, semi-double blooms in a showy mix of colors and bronze-tinted foliage.

CA poppies tend to make their greatest shows on grazed hillsides since the animals avoid eating the bitter-tasting plants and eliminate most of the poppy's competition. Several locations offer spectacular poppy show each year, including the "Grapevine," along Interstate 5 where it winds its way past Gorman at the northern edge of Los Angeles County.

The CA poppy has been transported to many other parts of the world, both as a garden plant and inadvertently. Once California's Gold Rush ended, miners set sail for new opportunities in Chile, New Zealand, and Australia. Using sand from the bluffs at San Francisco as ballast for their ships, they transported poppy seeds to these other places. Unfortunately they are sometimes considered a widespread weed.

May 10, 2007