

DESCANSO GARDENS

Wildflowers Paint Native Plant Garden

BY BRENDA REES

Every spring and summer, Descanso Gardens' California Native Plant Garden comes alive: purple California mountain lilacs, the bright yellow flannel bush, the delicate pink bells of manzanitas, and other shades of blue, orange, gold and white burst onto the pastoral scenery.

Created more than 50 years ago with help from Theodore Payne, the recognized expert in California plants, Descanso's Native Plant Garden still features some of those original plantings, with numerous others added through the years.

The garden was created to bring "a revival of interest in California flora, to educate school children in native plants and to create an area to demonstrate landscape uses for home owners," according to William Stewart, Director of the Los Angeles County Department Arboreta and Botanical Gardens.

Those goals in 1959 still hold true in 2010.

When viewing native flowers in bloom, try to imagine a time before freeways, skyscrapers and gated communities, when these vibrant flowers once filled hillsides, open fields and grasslands in Southern California. Today, a handful of places still boast substantial native wildflower landscapes.

"Antelope Valley, Santa Monica Mountains, the Anza-Borrego Desert and even Death Valley are good local places to check out wildflowers in bloom," says Rachel Young, Descanso's Native Garden Horticulturist. "And Descanso Gardens, of course.

"The California poppy, our state flower, is a great wildflower because it self seeds and likes the hot sun. Beneficial beetles eat the petals and pollinate these flowers so poppies are very important to the diversity of any garden."

The late blooming Farewell-To-



CEANOTHUS, MOUNTAIN LILAC



MANZANITA



CALIFORNIA POPPY



FREMONTODENDRON



LUPINE

Spring flowers feature a mix of colors from hot pink to white and, according to Young, "if you dead-head these flowers, you'll also see a second round of blooms."

Stately lupines are "beautiful large plants with deep purple flow-

ers," and Young says one of her all-time wildflower favorites are the California bluebell because "of its rich blue color and it's a nice contrast when you plant it near the California poppy."

These warm spring flowers were

conceived back in cool autumn days, explains Young, who describes the three planting methods for native plants that are used at Descanso.

"Some were sowed and planted by hand, others were mixed with sand and broadcast (tossed by hand) and then we used seed balls in other areas," she says. Seed balls are a mixture of compost, clay and seeds that protect the seeds from being eaten by birds and other hungry critters.

Young suggests homeowners should consider adding California natives to their yards because the flowers work great in any open areas and require little care or water. "Think of making a lovely meadow from an empty space, and you are inviting birds, bees and other pollinators into your garden," she says.

Once the spring wildflowers finish their show, the summer plants – the Matilija poppy, sticky monkey flower and a myriad of sages – take center stage. Then, in late summer and fall, the garden is mostly greens, grays and browns because many native plants go dormant to survive the hot, dry summers.

Perhaps a visit to the Native Garden will "cause a revival of interest" in California wildflowers for visitors today as it did 50 years ago. After all, these wildflowers growing at Descanso are relatives of plants that have been thriving, blooming and seeding in the area for hundreds of years. They deserve our undivided attention. ✿

Want to check out wildflowers? The Theodore Payne Foundation operates a California Wildflower Hotline that updates bloom forecasts weekly on a phone recorded message and website. The hotline runs from March to May. Call (818) 768-3533 or visit www.theodore-payne.org.

Descanso Gardens is located at 1418 Descanso Dr., La Cañada. General admission is \$8 for adults, \$6 for students/seniors and \$3 for children 5-12. Children 4 and younger are free. Descanso is open from 9 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. every day except Christmas. For more information, call (818) 949-4200 or visit www.descansogardens.org.



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