Pacific Bleeding Hearts Herald in Spring
by Len Lindstrand III
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One of the earliest herbaceous plants in our surrounding foothills and forests to emerge from winter dormancy also happens to be one of the most beautiful. Each year during late winter, the ferny foliage of Pacific bleeding heart slowly begins to emerge from its moist shady habitats among the forest floor, letting us know that spring is not too far away.

Finding this plant in the wild can be sometimes challenging, but fortunately for us this species also grows quite well in local gardens and provides an easy way to enjoy the burst of its unique foliage and stunning flowers that soon follow.

Pacific bleeding heart, *Dicentra formosa*, is an herbaceous perennial species in the Papaveraceae, or poppy, family; although some sources classify it in the Fumariaceae, or fumitory, family. Either way, this attractive species is always exciting to see in the wild, where it often forms dense patches on the forest floor.

Pacific bleeding heart is native to the Pacific Northwest, occurring in portions of Idaho and northwestern Montana, and from southern British Columbia to California. In California, it occurs in the Klamath Mountains, the Coast and Cascade ranges, and the Sierra Nevada, where it grows from near sea level to around 7,000 feet in moist woodland and conifer forest habitats.

Pacific bleeding heart grows from rhizomes that occur near the soil surface and prefers shady areas with at least seasonal moisture. The plant has no stem, as the leaf and flower stalks grow directly from the

Photo by Len Lindstrand III.
roots. A typical plant grows up to around 2 feet tall and 2 feet wide, though some patches may reach several square feet in size. In these patches, Pacific bleeding heart leaves slowly emerge directly from the rhizomes as the plant breaks dormancy during late winter and early spring.

The leaves are bluish green, delicate, deeply cut and fern-like in appearance. Rising above the ferny foliage, the namesake Pacific bleeding heart flowers grow in small clusters on top of a long, thin, arched stalk. The pink to rose-purple flowers are pendulous and jewel-like, about ¾-inch long, puffy, and perfectly heart-shaped. Depending on location and elevation, the plant blooms from early spring through early summer. In the Redding area, they typically bloom from March through late-May.

In addition to spreading from rhizomes, Pacific bleeding heart also has a unique mechanism to assist their dispersal—a symbiotic relationship with ants that attract ants. The ants pick up the seeds and carry them back to their hills or burrows, where they consume the white part of the seed. The remaining portion of the seed is then discarded, which later germinates and starts a new plant.

Pacific bleeding heart is also an important plant for other wildlife, as it provides a food source for native butterfly caterpillars, cover for amphibians and reptiles, and serves as an important early-season nectar source for hummingbirds, butterflies, and native bees.

Despite its delicate appearance, Pacific bleeding heart is hardy and well suited for many garden conditions. It grows best in moist, shady locations with fertile soil, where it will spread rapidly and maintain leaves through summer. The plant is also surprisingly drought tolerant during the summer and grows well in dry and shady locations that have early-season moisture. In those conditions, the leaves will die back as the plant will go dormant during summer and fall. Pacific bleeding heart has very few pests and grows well with other plants that have similar moist and shady growth requirements such as ferns, wild ginger, and columbine. It can also serve as an accent plant under shade-tolerant shrubs and is a perfect selection for those shady areas that do not receive regular summer water.

Pacific bleeding heart is an attractive plant and provides a perfect balance of delicate, accenting flowers within a blanket of interesting ferny foliage. Add to the mix several beneficial wildlife values, including early season nectar, and you have the makings of an outstanding addition to your garden, both for beauty and wildlife attraction.