“Ithuriel’s spear and grassnut, triplet lily, wild hyacinth, fool’s onion, prettyface, cluster-lily, bluedicks, ookow, firecracker flower, snakelily, wally basket”—these are some of the names people have given to a group of our most beautiful native bulbs, the brodiaeas. Their bright, starry or tubular flowers are held atop long slender stems, drawing our attention during the glorious weeks of their spring succession of blooms.

Brodiaeas like heavy soil, damp from fall through spring, and absolutely dry in summer. In this way they are perfectly adapted to California’s grasslands, vernal pools, and woodlands. After blooming and shedding seeds, their grasslike leaves dry up, leaving only the underground storage organs, called corms, to survive the hot summer encased in baked clay.

Although sometimes treated as a single genus, currently taxonomists divide brodiaeas into several groups—Triteleia, Dichelostemma, and Brodiaea being the most prominent—differing in number of stamens (three or six), length of flower stalks, and other technical characteristics. All have umbellate flower clusters atop a wiry leafless stem, meaning that all the individual flower stalks arise from a single central point, like an onion flower cluster.

Brodiaeas may have flat-topped, domed, or dense drumstick-like flower clusters. They do not smell or taste of onions. Brodiaeas were an important starchy food source for American Indians, eaten raw, boiled, or roasted. They are one of many reasons to be glad of living in California, where these gorgeous, colorful

White hyacinth umbels—note the six fertile stamens. Photo by Julie Kierstead Nelson.
flowers are more plentiful and varied than anywhere else on earth.

The season starts in March and early April with bluedicks, *Dichelostemma capitatum*, one of our earliest wildflowers, whose nectar is coveted by pipevine swallowtail butterflies. Next to bloom is ookow, *Dichelostemma congestum*, also blue-purple in color but many-flowered and each flower pinched in above the ovary. Soon after come wild white hyacinth, *Triteleia hyacinthina*; wally basket, *Triteleia laxa*; and the most spectacular of all, firecracker flower, *Dichelostemma ida-maia*. This bright red, tubular-flowered plant is restricted to northwestern California and southwestern Oregon, and is visited by hummingbirds. The brodiaea flower finale comes when the true *Brodiaea* species bloom, each purple flower at the end of a long umbrella-spoke, as the annual grasses turn brown and dry. Then our spring flora prepares to rest until cool temperatures and rains come again.

Shasta County has its own unique brodiaea species, *Brodiaea matsonii*, described in the botanical literature by Robert Preston in 2011. This very rare plant, named after local plantsman Gary Matson, is only known to occur along a short stretch of Sulphur Creek, north of Redding.

In the garden, brodiaeas like regular water during their growing season and then a dry rest during the heat of summer. Clay soil, and rocky clay soil, is tolerated or even preferred. Several species are offered in bulb catalogs; the larger bulb companies that sell to
customers in colder northern climates offer brodiaeas for shipping only in the spring, which is exactly the wrong time to plant these in California. If you order bulbs, choose a West Coast company that ships them in late summer or fall, and does not collect bulbs from the wild but propagates them from nursery stock.

Plant them relatively deeply for their size, and don’t expect them to stay put—these are favorite foods for rodents, who cache them for later feasting. I once found a stash of several hundred corms in a corner of one of our raised beds. Deer also eat the tops off, usually just as their much-anticipated blooms are about to open. Brodiaeas do well in containers, allowing the gardener to keep an eye on them and manage their watering—after flowering, put the pots aside with a wire mesh cover to keep hungry critters from digging up the corms.

The trails around Shasta Lake, Whiskeytown, and the network of BLM trails in Shasta County are all great places to see brodiaeas, from early spring until early summer.