As you drive or hike around Shasta County in late summer, the wild buckwheats are sure to attract your attention. Thriving on dry and barren slopes, they are blooming now in shades of white, cream, yellow, and pink.

The wild buckwheats are members of the knotweed family and belong to the genus *Eriogonum*. They are not to be confused with the cultivated buckwheat grain used for pancakes and pillows, or the nasty weed in the same family, black bindweed, also confusingly called wild buckwheat.

Wild buckwheats are found only in North America, mostly in the arid western United States. Fully half of all wild buckwheats are found in California, where it is the second largest genus. More than half of them are threatened or endangered. An amazing total of about 30 different kinds of wild buckwheats are found in Shasta County.

Buckwheats can be shrubs ranging in size from a few inches to a few feet tall, herbaceous perennials, or annuals. The individual flowers of wild buckwheat are tiny, but they are usually clustered into eye-catching heads that are ball-shaped or flat-topped.

They bloom later in the summer and well into fall when most other flowers have faded, making them stand out even more.

Wild buckwheats grow in a variety of dry, well-drained sites: roadsides, deserts, talus slopes, or riverside gravel bars. Anybody who has driven through the Mojave Desert will be familiar with the inflated
stalks of desert trumpet buckwheat along the roadsides. Along California’s central and southern coast, California buckwheat is common in coastal scrub, and provides a very important source of nectar for honey bees.

Driving north on Interstate 5 in late summer and fall, you won’t miss the yellow heads of naked buckwheat on the slopes all along the freeway. Along the Sacramento River, you will find the bright yellow flowers of sulphur buckwheat, a compact shrub.

Much less common there is Wright’s buckwheat, with its strings of small white flowers arranged on untidy-looking shrubs, or you might notice the annual wickerstem buckwheat with its delicate wiry stems and hazy pink appearance.

Up on Lassen Peak there are wild buckwheats everywhere you look. Bear buckwheat clings to rocky slopes and is covered in large balls of pale yellow flowers. Nestled in the most barren areas of pumice you will find the neat mats of rosy buckwheat, which, despite its name, bears round heads of bright yellow flowers, contrasting with the equally neat cushion buckwheat with its deep pink flowers.

Being tolerant of arid sites, wild buckwheats make an excellent addition for a dry area in the garden, where they partner well with penstemons, coyote mint, and native lupines. Easily grown from seed, they require an open site with good drainage, little summer water, and almost no fertilizer. Some varieties might benefit from light shade during the peak of Redding’s summer sunshine. Given these conditions, buckwheats will thrive in the garden. The smaller shrubby types such as coast buckwheat, and especially sulphur buckwheat,
form low mounded shrubs with neat evergreen leaves. Ideal for the front of a border, they can be trimmed occasionally to keep them in shape.

California buckwheat is a taller shrub and makes a nice specimen plant. All varieties produce abundant flowers that will attract a flurry of small butterflies, bees, and beetles from June to October. After flowering, the heads often turn attractive shades of reddish-brown, and will stay on the plant well through fall and into winter—no need to dead-head!

This diverse and attractive group of plants now has its own fan club, the Eriogonum Society, which formed recently to promote and enjoy *Eriogonum* species in the wild and in the garden.

October is an ideal planting time in the Redding area, and The Shasta Chapter of the California Native Plant Society will have several different buckwheats to choose from at its fall plant sale on October 12 from 8 AM to 2 PM at the Shasta College farm on the northeast side of the campus, 11555 Old Oregon Trail in Redding.

Buckwheats attract pollinators, including bees. A bumble bee visits a tall woolly buckwheat (*Eriogonum elatum*). Photo by Margaret Widdowson.