By late-summer and early fall, many of our native plants have finished blooming for the season, and finding anything in flower proves very difficult.

Most botanical interest this time of year comes from various fruits, seeds, and early fall colors than from flowers. Some native plants, however, are late-season specialists, and many have blooms rivaling their springtime counterparts. These late-season blooms not only give flower lovers extra enjoyment, but also provide nectar sources for many bees, other insects, and hummingbirds during what can be lean times for this resource.

One of the more renowned of these late-season bloomers is California fuchsia.

California fuchsia, *Epilobium canum*, is a perennial sub-shrub in the Onagraceae, or evening-primrose family. This species is well known to native plant enthusiasts and gardeners throughout California for two primary reasons: for blooming fiercely through the hottest and driest periods of summer and fall, and for attracting and feeding hummingbirds.

The plant is popular in the horticulture trade and cultivars have been developed that offer many foliage and flower color variations. Often called *Zauschneria* due to its former genus name, California fuchsia occurs statewide in chaparral, woodland, conifer, and subalpine forest habitats on dry slopes and ridges, and rock outcrops, up to 10,000 feet elevation. There are three subspecies in California, two of which occur in the north state.

California fuchsia has generally lance-shaped leaves that are grayish-green to green and about an inch long.
The base of the plant is often woody and its hairy stems are slender and almost vine-like. The flowers are bright red and appear on short stems along the ends of the plant’s many branches.

Designed for hummingbird pollination, the flowers are tubular or funnel-shaped and about 2 inches long. The flower stamens and style extend beyond the flared ends of four fused petals and sepals, giving a bursting appearance. Seedpods containing many seeds appear with the flowers, giving insight into the genus name *Epilobium*, which translates to “upon a capsule;” meaning the flower and seedpod appear together.

California fuchsia blooms from July through November, long after most other native plants have finished for the year. This timing makes it an important food source for hummingbirds ending their nesting season and starting their fall migrations—an important relationship because California fuchsia is dependent upon hummingbirds for pollination. Some species of bees also use the flowers for food, but instead of entering the flower they drill holes through the base of the petals to reach the nectar, cheating the plant of any pollination opportunities.

California fuchsia performs very well in a garden setting and serves many uses. The plant is a spreader and forms a somewhat mounded clump. Propagation is either through seedlings or underground rhizomes. California fuchsia is very drought tolerant and requires basically no special care. Summer water can increase growth, provided there is good drainage. Cutting back the branches a few inches in the winter also promotes more growth and a tidier look. These plants prefer open, hot locations, but can tolerate partial shade, though more open and sunny locations will have the best growth and blooms. California fuchsia makes a nice accent plant mixed with other drought-tolerant natives or can be used as a groundcover on hot, exposed areas. Plant it with California goldenrod, *Solidago californica*, another well-known late-season bloomer, for a mix of bright yellow flowers to accompany the scarlet red fuchsia. California fuchsia will even do well in a large container or planter.

Brilliant color, late-season blooms, drought-tolerance, and attractiveness to hummingbirds make California fuchsia a great choice for your garden. Look for them at the upcoming CNPS fall plant sale this October; rumor has it there will be many available. You can’t miss them, just look for the dramatic scarlet-red blooms—but watch out for the hummingbirds!

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