There is a most beautiful plant that I would tell you about, but one so rare that there is a fear that, should the wrong people learn about it, the plant could cease to exist. The promise I made, then, was that I would not tell its common name, or where exactly it lives.

The plants are in the family of the lilies, in the genus *Calochortus*—Greek for beautiful grass. There are 73 species in this genus, 44 either endemic, (meaning restricted to a particular place) or at least ranging into California. *Calochortus* are beautiful flowering plants found from the Pacific Ocean east to North Dakota, and from British Columbia south into Mexico.

One particular species, *Calochortus persistens*, grows in far northern California, and you might term it endemic if it weren’t for five plants found at a single location in Oregon. Except for those five plants, its entire population survives at 13 separate sites on no more than 200 acres.

The species’ name describes its nature to retain the remains of its flower parts, known as the perianth, on 0.4-inch long, three-winged seed capsules as they form. It is a truly beautiful plant, with stems up to 3.9 inches long, each supporting two to four 1.4- to 1.6-inch long, tulip-like flowers, which may be white, pink, or lilac colored. Each plant has one single leaf that is blue-green, shiny, and approximately 8 inches long by 2 inches wide.

These plants bloom from early to mid-July, and require seven years to reach a maturity, when they produce flowers. In 2007, botanists estimated the population at almost 104,000 plants, which you might think a high number for a plant considered rare, but remember, those plants all exist in an area of no more than 200 acres, and a high percentage of those never bloom, as there is not sufficient sunlight to do so.
These plants are healthiest in areas periodically cleaned out by fire, but because this population is near a city with outlying homes, chances of wildfire being allowed to burn through are lowered. They also compete against a plant introduced from Europe, dyer’s woad. This mustard plant is a fire lover, highly competitive, and considered allelopathic, meaning it poisons nearby competing plants through its own root system, thereby providing itself more nutrients and a better water supply. So, using fire as a tool for *Calochortus persisens*’ survival would mean enhancing habitat for dyer’s woad, and at the same time endangering houses that surround the ecosystem.

Admire them, photograph them, but always be aware that they need protection. Below are other species of this exquisite genus.

*Calochortus macrocarpus*. Photo by Richard L. Hayes.

*Calochortus superbus*. Photo by Richard L. Hayes.

*Calochortus monophyllus*. Photo by Richard L. Hayes.

*Calochortus syntrophus*. Photo by Richard L. Hayes.