As you walk through the valley, foothills, and mountains of our region, one of the more common shrubs you encounter is also one of our most hardy, attractive and useful: California coffeeberry, or *Rhamnus californica*.

It should be noted that botanical taxonomists have recently changed the genus from *Rhamnus* to *Frangula*, which tends to confuse the lay botanist. A short hike through the natural section of the McConnell Arboretum or along the Sacramento River Trail in Redding will reveal many examples of this plant.

Coffeeberry, which has evergreen vegetation and striking large, red to black berries, can be found in a variety of habitats from southwestern Oregon, California, and Arizona to New Mexico. In nature, this plant is usually found in partial shade or full sun, even in the direct sun and heat of Redding. It seems happy at elevations from 2,300 feet down to sea level and can grow to heights of 3 to 15 feet tall. This member of the buckthorn family has about 150 cousin species in Asia and North America, with a few found in Europe and Africa.

The attractiveness of this plant is not confined to encounters during hikes along our many local trails, but can be easily tamed and featured in your home landscape. Who wouldn’t want a shrub that is relatively fast growing, bears deep green leaves throughout the year, has clusters of small cream-colored flowers that attract armies of birds and pollinators, has marble-sized dark coffee-like berries attractive to birds, is relatively pest free, is generally deer-proof, and requires almost no irrigation?
In my Redding yard, a coffeeberry shrub flourishes on the warm (south) side of the house in direct sun. From this kitchen window location, I can see spring clusters of flowers that may not be showy, but the hum of native bees and other pollinators reveal their presence. Butterflies, including pale swallowtails, also have a taste for the nectar. This plant stands as an oasis to all of the native pollen- and nectar-feeders who buzz right past the acres of lawn and other foreign plants that inhabit the neighborhood.

Later in the year, flocks of bushtits descend upon the plant to glean it of any bits of food they can find. Other birds such as robins, thrushes, and tanagers relish the fruits. Even though little or no water is needed once the plant is established, this coffeeberry seems to do very well with a little irrigation overspray from a nearby fruit tree. If the plant gets a little too robust over a sidewalk or gets too close to neighboring plants, it can be pruned to a more desirable size and shape. As ripe berries drop to the ground after summer, you may even find young coffeeberry sprouts that can be transplanted or shared with friends.

Modern plant lovers can appreciate coffeeberry for its many landscaping attributes, but California American Indians also saw this plant as a source of many pharmaceutical and food uses. When the Wintu of northern California or the Cahuilla in the southern part of the state collected parts of the coffeeberry, it was like a trip to Raley’s or Walgreens. Ripe, dark berries were eaten fresh or dried. A laxative was made from the bark and berries. A decoction (strong tea-like potion) of the bark was also used to treat poison oak and dermatitis. Crushed berries were good for sores and wounds, and heated roots were held in the mouth for toothaches.

During the Shasta College Spring Plant Sale held in conjunction with the California Native Plant Society, many coffeeberries will be available. The sale will be at the Shasta College Farm/Horticulture Area from Thursday through Saturday, April 10 to 12, and will feature an array of native plants as well as the College Horticultural Department’s vegetables and flowers. Hours of the sale are 8 AM to 5 PM on Thursday and Friday, and 9 AM to 4 PM on Saturday. For more information on the Spring Plant Sale, please call 221-0906.

Rhamnus californica. The vein patterns of coffee berry is striking but the flowers are small and inconspicuous. Image by Julie Nelson.

Coffeeberry grows as a drought-tolerant ornamental shrub in Redding. Photo by Jay Thesken.