The cold temperatures, short days, and the sight of many leafless trees and shrubs during our winter months tend to make us think just like the old adage of hibernating bears—that nature has shut down for a winter nap.

While many critters and plants may indeed take a winter snooze, even a casual observer will notice that there is much more going on in the woods this time of year than one may think. A hike or simple outing to one of our nearby trails or outdoor areas reveals an abundance of winter plant and related animal activity; many perennial and annual grasses and forbs have already begun to grow, toyon berries are still hanging and feeding American robins, and winter-flowering shrubs like our manzanitas are beginning to bloom.

Another one of our interesting local native shrubs active during winter is coyotebrush. Not only is this species important in wildlands because of its many habitat values and well-timed flowering period, it also makes a great and easy to grow addition to our gardens.

Coyotebrush, *Baccharis pilularis*, grows throughout California’s coast ranges and Sierra Nevada foothills in coastal scrub, chaparral, and woodland habitats up to approximately 5,000 feet elevation. This shrub is considered a secondary pioneer species, or one of the first woody plants to grow after a disturbance event. As such, it is often found in areas that have been recently cleared, burned, or flooded.
Also known as chaparral broom or bush baccharis, coyotebrush is a perennial shrub with different habits depending upon location. Plants found on dunes and other coastal areas influenced by onshore winds and salt spray often grow in a prostrate or mat form, while at inland locations, coyotebrush shrubs are upright, rounded, and may reach 12 feet in height.

A member of the Asteraceae, or sunflower family, coyotebrush is typically an open or “leggy” shrub with leaves clustered at the ends of long, bare stems and branches. The ½- to 1-inch long leaves are green and somewhat egg shaped with jagged edges. Coyotebrush is dioecious, meaning that it produces male and female flowers on separate plants. The flowers are small and fluffy, and occur in tight clusters at the ends of the leafy stems. The shrubs with whitish flowers are the females, while shrubs with yellowish flowers are the males. Blooming occurs late in the season, generally from August through December—locally, our coyotebrush tends to flower in the middle of winter from late November through January. Seeds are small black nuts that hang from a fluffy tuft of hair called a pappus that catch the wind and blow away to land and make new seedlings.

Combinations of habit and blooming period help make coyotebrush an excellent wildlife plant. The shrub has many stems that arise from clumps near the ground, forming dense vegetative cover preferred by many small mammals and low-nesting birds. Being evergreen, this cover is present year-round. With its fall and winter blooming period, coyotebrush provides an important late-season nectar source that attracts many bees, butterflies, predatory wasps, and other insects—which are in turn food sources for other wildlife.

In the Redding area, coyotebrush flowers from November to January, adding a burst of color to our winter landscape. Photo by Len Lindstrand III.

In the garden, coyotebrush will flourish in a wide range of conditions. It tolerates poor soil, thrives in dry settings, and is deer resistant. Coyotebrush is best suited to areas with full sun, though it will also take some shade. It makes a fine specimen plant or works well mixed with other drought-tolerant shrubs.

Since it’s a pioneer species, this shrub is often used for restoration projects in natural areas. In our gardens, that means it makes a great choice for those open, sunny areas and works well to stabilize exposed slopes. The shrub is fast growing and matures in one to two years. It quickly grows a large taproot and also has well developed lateral roots, which help it survive in its dry environments and respond to those disturbance events. Pruning can be used to maintain shape if desired and encourages vigorous new growth.

Coyotebrush makes a great selection for your garden and provides a unique combination of drought tolerance, fast growth, attractive winter blooms, many wildlife habitat values, and being easy to grow in inhospitable locations. Cultivars, typically low-growing varieties, are usually available at standard nurseries, while the resident form is available from native plant nurseries or our CNPS plant sales.