Now that fall has arrived, most native plants have completed their annual flowering and growth periods and are busy producing seeds, nuts, berries, and other fruits. This burst of production comes just in time, as most wildlife species have finished their summer breeding season and are preparing for the fall and winter months. Called “mast” in botanical terms, all those seeds, nuts, berries, and fruits not only provide a start for future plant generations, but a delicious buffet for wildlife, as well.

You may have noticed lately those birds that hung around all spring and summer now have nearly full-grown offspring. Nature’s complex timing includes raising young when resources are most available. And now is time for those young birds to finish their juvenile stage, as the fall bounty of mast has arrived. Fall also marks the beginning of the bird migration season and another reason why birds will be feasting en masse as species that are leaving need to build their energy reserves, while those arriving for the winter will be hungry from their travels and need food to overwinter. Plants meeting these needs are highly sought after by wildlife for their habitat value and food production. One of California’s classic habitat- and food-producing shrubs is blue elderberry.

Blue elderberry is a member of the Adoxaceae, or the muskroot family. This woody shrub occurs from western Texas north to Montana, western Alberta,
and southern British Columbia, through all other western states, and south into northwestern Mexico. In California, it occurs along streams and at scattered locations in woodlands and forests below about 3,000 foot elevation, and is best known from valley oak woodlands and mixed riparian forests in the Central Valley, where it occurs on floodplains and grows in sandy to silt loam soils. There are two other forms that grow in the mountains—black elderberry and red elderberry.

Blue elderberry is well known for its use in making jams, jellies, pies, and wine. The shrub is infamous for often being the bane of developers, engineers, and planners, as blue elderberry in the Central Valley is the host plant for the federally threatened valley elderberry longhorn beetle. Fruit preserves, desserts, libations, and environmental regulations aside, blue elderberry is a significant habitat plant and an important wildlife food source.

Blue elderberry is a multi-trunked large shrub or small tree that grows 10 to 30 feet tall. The shrub typically has a fountain-like habit due to its multiple trunks and often forms dense thickets. The shrub has spongy, pithy stems that are bluish-green or reddish when new, then turn an attractive red-brown and become furrowed with age as the bark develops. Leaves are dark to pale green and arranged in an opposite, pinnately compound fashion. Each leaf is 6 to 12 inches long and consists of 5 to 9 oblong leaflets, each of which is 2 to 6 inches long with serrated edges.

The flowers are large flat-topped clusters consisting of many smaller cream colored flowers that occur at the end of the branches during spring and summer. These flowers turn into dense bunches of 1/4-inch dark blue to black berries covered by a waxy whitish coating, which gives them a blue color. The fruits ripen in mid-summer through fall. Blue elderberry blooms and produces fruit over several weeks, so there are many “batches” of berries available throughout late summer and fall.
migratory and resident birds. Blue elderberry also provides abundant vegetative structure used by many wildlife species, as these shrubs are often densely branched, and the multiple stems of varying sizes provide nest sites for birds, and thick cover for small mammals and reptiles. The shrub is often used in habitat restoration projects because of these wildlife values.

In home landscapes, blue elderberry is a perfect plant for those who want to attract wildlife to their yards. The shrub is hardy and fast growing, although the foliage will lose some color in summer and leaves may drop. Blue elderberry is drought deciduous, meaning it stops leaf growth once the roots no longer have access to adequate moisture, and remains dormant until soil moisture increases. This typically happens in late summer, but by then other characteristics such as the red-brown furrowed bark and the clusters of berries provide plenty of attractive garden traits. The shrub grows best in full sun or partial shade, and needs well-drained soil. It makes a great specimen plant when maintained by pruning new stems each spring; or let the new stems grow and the plant provides a dense border or thicket, if desired.

Blue elderberry serves an important role in our wildlands, and its numerous attractive and interesting features make it an excellent choice for your home. If attracting wildlife is your goal, this plant is for you.

A handful of blue elderberry are among 750 other native plants available at the upcoming Shasta Chapter of the California Native Plant Society annual fall plant sale. The sale runs from 8 AM to 2 PM on October 11, and is located at the greenhouse of the horticulture area at the northeast side of Shasta College. Books, posters and other information, and expert advice are available. Fall is the best time to plant natives, so plan on attending and come early—the inventory doesn’t last long.