General John C. Fremont, an adventurous explorer and officer with the Army Corps of Topographical Engineers in the West during the 1800s, is responsible for a number of the colorful place names applied to locations in what is now the state of California. His exploratory expeditions in 1844 and 1845 also resulted in the naming of numerous plants.

Fremont, along with artists, topographers, botanists and engineers, made at least two lengthy expeditions to Oregon and California prior to the Bear Flag Revolt and the subsequent U.S. acquisition of California. He was often referred to as “The Great Pathfinder” for his efforts to find and map trails for American settlers coming to the West. His name was later applied to more than 100 places in the West, including locations he explored along the Cascades and Sierras.

Places named in Fremont’s honor include the city of Fremont, Fremont Peak, Fremont Peak State Park, and Fremont Peak Observatory, as well as many street names. The original name of Yolo County was Fremont County.

One of California’s native plants that carries the name of this important character is the colorful Redding-area shrub named fremontia, or California flannelbush. The rather long scientific name of this showy shrub is *Fremontodendron californicum*. The genus has two other species, both of which are native to California—Pine Hill flannelbush (*F. decumbens*) and Mexican flannelbush (*F. mexicanum*). Both of these species have very restricted distributions and the Pine Hill flannelbush is federally listed as endangered.

Travelers on Highway 44 East between Palo Cedro and Shingletown may notice these distinctive shrubs in the spring and early summer, alongside the roadway. A particularly large and spectacular specimen of fremontia can be found at the end of the I-5 southbound off-ramp of Knighton Road.
Fremontia blooms during May and June, with large, bright yellow flowers that catch the eye. The shrub itself measures up to 12 feet tall, and may be nearly 12 feet in diameter. Fremontia is typically found between elevations of 1,200 and 4,000 feet, and grows in dry foothill oak-pine woodlands and rocky areas.

The common name, flannelbush, applies to the velvety-soft hairs coating the stems and leaves of the plant, sometimes leaving a slight rash on unsuspecting admirers who touch it. The upper surfaces of the 2-inch-long lobed leaves are dark green and hairy, with the undersides of the leaves sporting a soft, dense felt that turns golden with age.

The striking flowers of fremontia can measure 2 to 3 inches in diameter, with five sepals that disguise themselves as petals. Numerous waxy yellow flowers are borne along each branch of the plant, forming spectacular displays during the spring. The flowers often grow on bristly spurs on the branches. The fruits of fremontia are spherical in shape, about 1.5 inches long, and last for many months. They are golden to brown in color, and carry two to three seeds each.

Fremontia can be used as an excellent screening shrub in formal landscaping because it is evergreen, meaning that it keeps its leathery leaves all year round. The plant prefers little to no water, making it a good choice for ornamental, drought-tolerant gardens. After a fire, fremontia readily sprouts and recovers. Deer may nibble on the foliage, even though it is fuzzy. Cattle also are known to browse the nutritious twigs of the plant.

In the past, Native Americans used the bark of fremontia by brewing it into a tea to relieve throat irritation. The inner bark was used as a soothing poultice. Because of the jellylike nature of the inner bark, locals often referred to the plant as “slippery elm.”

So where can you get one of these California beauties? Most nurseries don’t carry them, as they are difficult to propagate or start from seed. They are also usually expensive if one is even able to find them. Several dozen fremontia will be available at the upcoming Fall Native Plant Sale, sponsored by the Shasta Chapter of the California Native Plant Society. The sale will be held 8 AM to 2 PM, October 10, at the horticulture/farm area of Shasta College. There will be more than 1,100 drought-tolerant, California native plants to choose from, with plant experts and enthusiasts available to answer questions. For more information, contact Terri Thesken at 530/221-0906.