If you are into hummingbird feeding, then you’ve probably noticed in most years during the middle of winter many of the “hummers” disappear from your feeder for a while and leave you wondering, “where did they all go?”

They haven’t left; in fact, they probably aren’t far away at all, it’s just that they have changed their favorite snack from your feeder nectar to the natural nectar (and small insects) found during the abundant manzanita bloom happening in our local valley and foothills.

Manzanita is one of California’s most common shrubs, with more than 100 species or subspecies occurring statewide. Because we have so much of it around us and most folks dislike trying to walk through the stuff, manzanita is often considered somewhat of a pest plant. In a garden setting, however, their complex form and habit, evergreen foliage, smooth reddish bark, fragrant flower clusters, and small apple-like fruits make manzanita an attractive, hardy, and easy to grow addition to our homes.

The genus name for manzanita is *Arctostaphylos*, meaning “bear berries,” and if you have ever seen a pile of bear poop in the summer or fall, you’ll know why. Young manzanita fruits resemble small apples, hence the common name derived from “manzana,” the Spanish word for apple. These berries grow in abundance and are a valuable food source for many wildlife species. Manzanitas have evergreen leaves,
intricate branching patterns, and lovely smooth reddish bark. Flowers form on a droopy inflorescence called a raceme and consist of many urn-shaped blossoms. These flowers produce the apple-like berries that slowly turn from green to reddish or brownish as they mature. Some manzanita species produce burls at the root crown that allow them to resprout following fire and regenerate without seed.

Locally, our three most abundant manzanita species include common (or bigleaf) manzanita, greenleaf manzanita, and whiteleaf manzanita. These species are some of our earliest flowering plants, sometimes starting as early as December, which is why we often see the change in hummingbird activity in what we consider the middle of winter.

Common manzanita, *Arctostaphylos manzanita*, is a large shrub or small tree with pale green leaves and pinkish to whitish flowers that produce blueberry-sized deep red berries. Most of what people call greenleaf manzanita around Redding is actually common manzanita. The flower colors are an easy way to tell the difference, but if they are absent check for a burl or look at the twigs. Common manzanita does not form a burl and has twigs that are hairless or with fine white hairs.

A little higher in elevation in the foothills and mountains we have greenleaf manzanita, *Arctostaphylos patula*. Greenleaf manzanita is a dense shrub with bright green foliage and pink flowers. This species does form a burl and the twigs have fine golden hairs topped with small glands.

Whiteleaf manzanita, *Arctostaphylos viscida*, is our other dominant local manzanita. Easily recognized by its whitish-gray leaves and white to pink flowers, this is a large, open-branched shrub with red to brownish berries.

Manzanita makes a great specimen plant in the garden, or can be combined with many other shrubs or trees. These plants prefer full sun but can tolerate partial shade and are drought resistant once established. With masses of winter flowers, a striking shape, beautiful smooth reddish bark, colorful berries, and evergreen foliage, manzanitas have much to offer and make a great choice for your home landscape.

And don’t worry about the hummers—just clean and refill your feeders; they will be back in earnest once the bloom wanes and spring approaches.