Quite often we associate California native plant use with somewhat dry, naturalized gardens and landscapes. Today we are introducing *Cercocarpis betuloides*, a California native shrub that performs superbly in manicured landscapes as a foundation plant or hedge and also functions well for erosion control on slopes, nitrogen fixing under native oaks and other trees, and is an excellent pollinator plant for butterflies and larvae. Commonly known as mountain mahogany, this evergreen shrub has an upright, graceful structure. A medium to fast grower, it will mature to 5 feet tall and wide without irrigation, and can reach 8 to 10 feet high and 8 feet across when it receives regular summer water. If we are in a drought and not receiving ample winter rains, *Cercocarpis betuloides* grows at a much slower rate.

It is a handsome shrub with 1-inch textured and toothed green leaves. The branches are upright and silver-gray in color. Mountain mahogany sets a small, fragrant, pale yellow bloom in the spring, followed later in the summer by whimsical, feathery-tailed seed heads that sparkle in the sun.

Preferring full sun or partial shade, *Cercocarpis* is not particular about soil type. It will thrive in temperatures down to 20 degrees. Anything colder than that and it will still live, but may lose its leaves for the rest of the winter and leaf out again in the spring.

Mountain mahogany can be heavily pruned and will even take hedging. It does very well tucked into rock niches on slopes. It’s somewhat deer resistant, but deer do browse it occasionally. In a drought year,
deer may take all the leaves, depending on what else they have available for food. No need to worry, though, this shrub will handily re-sprout new leaves.

You may wonder why the common name of this shrub is mountain mahogany. It was named for the extreme hardness of its trunk wood. In fact, Native Americans used the branches to make arrows for catching fish. The plant also makes a purple dye that can be extracted from its bark and roots, which also could allude to its common name.

In its natural habitat, in and around Redding, *Cercocarpis betuloides* is often found on the slopes of our many seasonal creeks. It also occurs abundantly throughout Whiskeytown National Recreation Area and is in chaparral, and pine-oak woodlands throughout California. You can see a specimen planting of mountain mahogany at the North Valley Art League Garden in Caldwell Park.

This fall, buy a few of these ideal shrubs for your formal or natural garden. Or, even better, stop by the Shasta Chapter’s California Native Plant Society plant sale in early October. Above all, enjoy the water-conserving and other benefits of using California natives on the grounds around your home.