As October arrives, our local foothills seem renewed by a profusion of fall colors and masses of seeds, nuts, fruits, and acorns in all shapes and sizes.

One of the more conspicuous sights is the large seedpods of western redbud. These seedpods are not only one of western redbud’s many interesting features; they also provide opportunity for a simple introduction into native plant propagation.

Western redbud, Cercis occidentalis, is a deciduous shrub or small tree in the Fabaceae, or Legume family. One of California’s well known and most beautiful spring-flowering native shrubs, western redbud is truly an all-season plant that provides many ecological values in our wildlands, and horticultural interest to our home gardens.

In California, western redbud occurs mainly in foothill woodland and chaparral habitats below 4,500 feet elevation in the North Coast, Klamath, Cascade, and Peninsular ranges, and in the Sierra Nevada. Like most legumes, western redbud has nitrogen-fixing bacteria that form on its roots, adding nitrogen into the surrounding ecosystem through decaying plant parts. Wildlife use the plant for cover and food, and the flowers are like magnets to bees and other insects.

During winter, western redbud shows its slender and intricate silvery gray branches and overall rounded habit. In early spring, these branches become covered with ½ inch long bright rosy pink pea-like flowers. A harbinger of spring, flowering western redbud is always a welcome sight following a long winter.
After the stunning flower show come the leaves; western redbud has large rounded leaves with a heart-shaped base that turn from light apple green and delicate, to dark green and leathery with age. The distinctive flattened seedpods begin to emerge soon after peak flowering and reach 1½ to 3½ inches in length when mature. Starting small and a lime green color, the seedpods gradually turn rose purple by summer and dark brown or gray as they dry during fall. Because of these showy seedpods, western redbud is like a plant that flowers twice each year.

In the garden, western redbud makes a great specimen plant or can be combined with other species. Its attractive habit and four-season interest make it a great fit for many settings.

Western redbud has beautiful early spring flowers, green leaves all summer, and typically in fall the leaves turn various shades of yellow, gold, and red, providing nice late-season color. The large seedpods are visible all spring and summer and often persist through the winter months.

It prefers full sun to partial shade and is drought tolerant once established. Western redbud also responds well to pruning and can be easily shaped into a small patio tree. It is also resistant to pests and disease; though you may occasionally see small circular cuts along the leaf edges—but don’t worry, these are actually from native leaf cutter bees just borrowing some of your plant to help make their nests.

Growing western redbud is relatively easy, and fall is the best time to start. First, you need some seeds, so get outside and find a western redbud shrub with seedpods still hanging from the branches. Split open the seedpods and you will find several small brownish pea-like seeds inside. Set these aside in a dry location once you have as many as you need.

The first step in preparing the seeds for planting is a hot water treatment to start breaking down the hard seed coat. Place your seeds in a sturdy container or pot. In a separate pot, bring water to a boil and then completely immerse the seeds with the hot water. Set aside for 24 hours, then remove all seeds from the water and allow to completely dry.

Once dry, you are ready for the next step, called cold stratification. Cold stratification is basically a process that mimics the time a seed would otherwise spend outside during the winter. Place the treated seeds on a napkin or piece of paper towel and set inside a small ziploc bag, write the date on the bag (so you can track stratification time), and place in a refrigerator—it’s going to sit there for two to three months, so find a place where the bag won’t get disturbed too much when rummaging through your leftovers.
After stratification, the seeds are ready for planting, so now fast-forward to early next year. If you started stratification this November, let’s say, then by late February or early March you are ready for planting. All you need to do is prepare a small pot with potting soil, place a couple seeds in the pot, and cover with a little more soil. Place the pot in a window sill, greenhouse if you have one available, or a sunny location somewhere in your yard—just find a place where the pots won’t get knocked over by pets, squirrels, the mother-in-law, birds, etc.

As the year progresses and things begin to dry, you will need to water the planting to keep things moist. By spring, you will notice young western redbuds in your pot. Keep them in a sunny location, water enough so they don’t dry out, and they will grow 6 to 10 inches during the summer. In fall, they are ready for transplanting into a larger plant container or straight into your garden.

Of course, you can always visit the CNPS fall plant sale this month and buy western redbud all ready to go, but where’s the experience in that?

I suggest doing both, buy one and propagate your own for the best of both worlds.

The CNPS fall plant sale is next Saturday, October 12, from 8 AM to 2 PM. We have 40 western redbuds for sale, but get there early, they will go quickly!