Scattered among sunny openings in our surrounding chaparral, woodlands, and low elevation conifer forests lies an attractive and fragrant ground-covering plant called Sonoma sage.

Related to the culinary sage from the Mediterranean region, most of California’s native sages live in deserts or the coastal chaparral of central to southern California. These sages are in the genus Salvia and represent the “true sages,” as opposed to the “sagebrushes,” which are in the genus Artemisia.

The term salvia means “to save” in Latin and refers to the medicinal uses of many plants from this genus. Famous for their attractive flowers and pungent aroma, salvias are so well known from the central to southern regions that they are considered to contain the signature scent of California’s coastal chaparral. While lower in stature than many California sages, our local Sonoma sage has plenty of its own aroma and serves as an important ground cover while attracting many insects and birds.

Sonoma sage, Salvia sonomensis, is a perennial sub-shrub in the mint family. Widespread in California, Sonoma sage is found locally in the Sierra Nevada foothills and throughout the northern, central, and southern mountain ranges generally below 6,500-feet elevation. Also known as creeping sage, this plant offers many garden values including spectacular flowers, attractive foliage, and the ability to thrive in those troublesome areas too hot and exposed for many landscape plants, making it a perfect native ground cover.
Sonoma sage is a low, creeping plant with pale gray-green, wrinkled leaves. Typically 1 or 2 feet in size, single plants can branch out as much as 3 to 4 feet in diameter. They often grow in patches of many individuals and can form dense mats. The foliage consists of generally lance shaped, textured leaves with a felt-like quality arranged in pairs along spreading stems. It’s these leaves that contain most of the pungent aroma, and if you happen to step into a patch of them you will be quickly overcome by a strong sage odor.

Each spring the creeping plant becomes covered with whorled, tubular, two-lipped lavender-blue flowers that grow on tiered spikes to between 6 and 12 inches above the foliage. These showy flowers are irresistible to bees, other insects, and hummingbirds. As the flowers finish for the year, whorls of dried seed heads remain and add late-season interest.

Sonoma sage requires areas with good drainage and performs well in open to lightly shaded locations. Once established it is very drought tolerant. It is also deer resistant and free of most diseases. In a garden setting, Sonoma sage will have a spreading habit and is an ideal ground cover for hot, dry slopes in full sun. They can also be used as accent plants and placed under drought-tolerant shrubs and trees. Sonoma sage is excellent for containing dry embankments or rock walls and has a cascading effect as it crawls over these surfaces.

Don’t let its practical value of providing ground cover on hot sunny areas fool you—Sonoma sage is truly attractive as well, and few other plants will draw more pollinators to your home landscape. Be sure to look for this species at our native plant sales—you won’t be disappointed.