For every plant that may be difficult to cultivate, it’s nice to know that there are easy-growing alternatives available to help even the odds in the gardener’s favor. *Spiraeas* are great examples of plants that improve the success side of the gardening equation. The genus *Spiraea* is a large group of shrubs with about 80 species growing throughout the temperate parts of the Northern Hemisphere. These shrubs are attractive, hardy, easy to care for, and fast growing, so it’s no wonder that many ornamentals have been developed from this genus.

Two native spireas occur in California, both of which perform well in garden settings. One of those species, Douglas’ spirea, occurs in Redding and its surrounding areas. This species provides a great option for those desiring a native spirea in their landscape. The shrub features lovely, long-lasting spring and summer flowers, attractive foliage, and best of all, it’s easy to grow.

Douglas’ spirea, *Spiraea douglasii*, is a deciduous shrub in the Rosaceae, or rose family. The genus name *Spiraea* comes from the Greek word *speira*, which refers to wreaths or garlands. This is why spireas are often referred to as bridal-wreath shrubs. The species *douglasii* was named after the famous Scottish botanist *David Douglas*. It has many other common names including steeplebush, rose spirea, pink spirea, and the most interesting, hardhack—a name given to

Dense foliage and large flower clusters make Douglas’ spirea attractive to many wildlife species. Photo by *Len Lindstrand III*. 
it by settlers because dense masses of the shrub are hard to hack through. In California, Douglas’ spirea occurs in the Coast Ranges, Klamath Range, and Sierra Nevada, where it grows along forest edges, meadows, and streamside areas below 2,000 feet elevation. In the Redding area, Douglas’ spirea occurs at scattered locations along the Sacramento River and other nearby streams. Outside California, Douglas’ spirea extends northward to British Columbia. The other California native spirea, mountain spirea, grows at higher elevations in the Klamath Range and Sierra Nevada, and extends northeasterly to the northern Rocky Mountains.

Douglas’ spirea has thin, oblong, pale green leaves with saw-toothed margins that are alternately arranged along slender brown twigs. In spring and summer, pyramidal or steeple-shaped panicles begin to grow at the ends of the twigs and transform into dense clusters of rose- or pink-purple flowers. The flowers are long lasting, and the shrub will continue to bloom throughout the summer, showing a mix of brownish-pink old flowers along with bright new flowers. Douglas’ spirea establishes quickly, and reaches 3 to 4 feet in height. The shrub spreads using wandering roots and forms thickets with a somewhat open or lax habit. In fall, the dense foliage provides nice seasonal color. Douglas’ spirea performs best in full sun to partial shade in areas that are somewhat moist.

Granted, this species may not follow the mantra of planting drought-tolerant native species, but it’s not a “wet plant,” either. Candidate planting locations already exist in most landscaping, reducing the need to provide supplemental irrigation. Areas such as lawn borders, low spots with seasonal moisture, and places near any existing water feature are all good locations.

Adding Douglas’ spirea to your landscape also helps attract wildlife to your home. The flowers attract butterflies, bees, and other insects, and dense thickets of the shrub provide excellent cover for small mammals, amphibians, and birds. These wildlife values combined with rapid growth make this species useful for wetland restoration projects, as it spreads rapidly to prevent erosion and tolerates seasonal flooding.

Besides being easy to grow, Douglas’ spirea is also easy to propagate, so if you are into the nursery side of gardening, this species is for you. Place winter hardwood cuttings in starter pots and the cuttings will root and begin to grow by early spring. We also feature this species at our CNPS spring and fall native plant sales, so you can always buy one there.

Douglas’ spirea is a great addition to any landscape. This shrub is easy to grow, features beautiful, long-lasting flowers, requires little care, and provides excellent wildlife habitat. So the next time you’re frustrated by another dead shrub in your yard, plant a Douglas’ spirea—odds are you will revel in gardening victory while enjoying an attractive addition to your home.