Every winter, thousands of visiting American robins flock to the foothills west of Redding to spend the day foraging. Toyon berries are the main menu item. Toyon is a shrub commonly found in the western parts of Shasta County. Watching large flocks of robins and many other bird species moving through and feeding among the stands of toyon is quite a sight.

Toyon (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*), also known as Christmas berry, is one of the classic shrubs of the California chaparral. If we were to ever name an official state shrub, toyon would be a great candidate. Except for an extension into Baja California, the shrub only occurs in California and is very typical of our vast foothill regions. Toyon is found in chaparral and woodlands surrounding the Central Valley and throughout California at elevations below 4,000 feet, except in desert regions. Hollywood, California’s world-famous film capital, was named after toyon due to the plant’s resemblance to European holly and its abundance in the hills of southern California. Toyon was originally named by the Ohlone tribe. Toyon is the only California native plant that continues to be commonly known by a Native American name.

A member of the rose family, toyon typically grows 8 to 15 feet in height and width, but larger specimens are possible and present as small trees. The evergreen plant has dark green, leathery, oblong leaves, 2 to 4 inches long. In spring, the shrub is covered in flat-topped clusters of many white flowers that occur at the ends of the dense foliage.
As pretty as the flowers are, it’s the fruits that really steal the show. The flowers give way to dense clusters of ¼-inch diameter orange-red berries that last late into the year. These berries are what attract and feed many birds. Common toyon customers in the north state include American robins, cedar waxwings, mockingbirds, and various finches and sparrows.

The late-season berries also make the plant a resource for Christmas greenery that can be used in place of true holly for decorating—if the birds don’t get there first.

In the garden, toyon is an easy, drought-resistant plant to grow. Just find a dry, sunny spot with well-drained soil and you’re done. The plants can take partial shade, although the foliage might get a bit rangy.

Toyon is fairly fast growing and makes a great specimen, accent plant, or even a hedge. Group it with other upland natives such as redbud and coffeeberry for a mixed border of drought-resistant shrubs. If you like birds, plant toyon where you can watch them gorge on the fall and winter berries. Our family’s toyon is near the kitchen window where we can witness the feast from just a few feet away.

Toyon is one of California’s most attractive shrubs and will be a great addition to your home landscape.

Oh, one more thing… toyon berries fit perfectly into a child’s ear. You can even squeeze two in there if you try. But don’t worry. There are local specialists with fancy gadgets to remove them if needed—just ask my little Katie.