As Shakespeare said, “What’s in a name?”

In the case of the brilliant western blue-eyed grass, its name is both descriptive and misleading. With its scientific name of *Sisyrinchium bellum*, it is not actually a grass at all. It’s a wildflower in the iris family. Because this wildflower’s characteristics so closely resemble grass when it is not in bloom, it’s often mistaken for a grass or sedge.

If you are lucky enough to be walking through a grassy, moist meadow during Redding’s delightfully cool spring and early summer months, you may see these blue- to purple-colored gems blooming among the grasses and sedges. The small, 1-inch diameter flowers are punctuated by a bright-yellow center, hence earning them the “eye” connotation. As a cluster, the well-named flowers appear as yellow-centered blue eyes peeking skyward.

Native to California and other Pacific states, blue-eyed grass blooms from March to June. The plant itself grows in a dense population of narrow, flattened iris-like leaves 4 to 16 inches in height with an unbranched and thin, flower-bearing stem equal in height to the leaves. Each of the 4 to 7 flowers per plant are comprised of 6 petals that are rounded to notched on their outer edge, often culminating in small sharp points at the tips. The blue to purple color of the dainty flower petals appears to be accented by darker stripes.

Blue-eyed grass grows from hardy rhizomes with fibrous roots, and is easily transplanted by dividing clumps and separating them into smaller clusters to be grown in pots, in rock gardens, or in meadows. The clusters will easily spread in a matter of weeks during the spring, and can also be divided in following years. The plant is perennial, meaning it comes back year after year. Typically, after blue-eyed grass blooms fade in the summer, the leaves remain green for a month or two, gathering necessary energy for the next
year’s blooms. After the leaves turn brown in late summer or fall, gardeners will often trim the leaves off just above the soil level. In nature, the plants are dormant in the fall through early winter. Blue-eyed grass is hardy and can tolerate freezing temperatures. The Native Plant Society propagates these plants by dividing the rhizomes in January.

Habitat for blue-eyed grass in our Redding area is in moist, lush meadows, along the edges of wetlands, or in woodlands at low to mid-elevations. In a garden setting, blue-eyed grass does not seem particular and can grow in just about any well-drained soil that our area has to offer. With Redding’s intense summer sun, it is best to offer blue-eyed grass partial shade if it is not being grown in a moist setting.

In history, with early explorations of California by the Spanish, blue-eyed grass was referred to as “azulea,” meaning of a deep blue or indigo color. Native Americans were known to make the leaves and roots of blue-eyed grass into a tea as a remedy for fever, stomach pain, and indigestion.

The bright flowers and yellow centers of blue-eyed grass are attractive to pollinators such as bees, and the dried seed heads are attractive to birds in the summer months. The plant is definitely widespread in California, extending into Baja California, and is also found in other western states, such as Oregon and Washington.

Wondering where you can get your hands on some of these little beauties? Most nurseries in the Redding area do not carry the California native blue-eyed grass. However, the California Native Plant Society will have dozens of them at the Shasta College Spring Plant Sale from April 16–18.

**PLANT SALE**

The third week of April is designated as California Native Plant Week, as established by a State Assembly and Senate Resolution in August of 2010. The first California Native Plant Week was officially celebrated in 2011, recognizing the importance of California native plant gardening and landscaping and its positive impact on watersheds, habitat recovery, and on curbing catastrophic wildfires. It recognizes that home gardening with California native species can reduce residential water use from 60 to 90 percent over conventional gardening, which is especially important in times of drought. Native birds and pollinators also find native plant landscaping very attractive for foraging and nesting.

In conjunction with California Native Plant Week, and to promote native plant conservation and the value of native plants in horticultural settings, the Shasta Chapter of the California Native Plant Society will be selling California native plant species at the Shasta College Spring Plant Sale. This plant sale will occur April 16–18. Hours for the sale, which is open to the public, will be 8 AM to 5 PM on Thursday and Friday, and 9 AM to 4 PM on Saturday. The sale is held at the Shasta College Farm/Horticultural Area, 11555 Old Oregon Trail, in Redding.

The Plant Society will have more than 2,000 native plants available at this three-day event. Shasta College students also will have non-native plants and vegetables for sale. Admission is free.

Proceeds from native plant sales go to college scholarships and plant-related grants for community and school projects in the North State.