



ASK A MASTER GARDENER

CALIFORNIA POPPIES

By Gay Wilhelm, Placer County Master Gardener

Q I have a hillside on which I would love to grow a meadow of California poppies. What's the best way to do this?

A Spanish explorers were fascinated by the hillsides ablaze with this bright California native and appropriately named the flower *Copa de Oro* or "Cup of Gold." This golden poppy has traveled the world thanks to the California gold miners. Miners used the local sand as ballast in sailing ships, spreading seeds as far as Chili, New Zealand and Australia. In 1903 the California poppy, *Eschscholzia californica* was named the state flower.

New hybrids are available in all shapes and colors. The Sunset strain has single blossoms. Mission Bells and Ballerina both have semi -double or double blooms with frilled or fluted petals. Thai Silk is compact 8-10 inches tall and has bronze-tinged flowers from yellow to orange, red, pink, rose, cream and white. Unfortunately when these hybrids reseed, they will revert back to their original wild ancestors.

A sunny hillside is perfect for California poppies. The poppies blue-green lacy foliage is small and allows it to thrive in arid conditions. The leaves have little surface area helping the plant conserve water. Poppies aren't picky when it comes to soil. They are happy with poor soil and will even do well without organic matter. The one thing they will not tolerate is wet roots, making a hillside perfect.

Poppies do not transplant well, so best to use seeds. The time to broadcast spread or plant in rows under ¼ of soil is early spring (now)! If the hillside is covered with vegetation, consider removing it. Yellow star thistle as well as other weeds have very competitive root systems. If you broadcast the tiny seeds, mix with sand. Be sure to keep the soil moist until the seeds germinate. The plants should self-sow year after year. Use 3-4 pounds of seed per acre. Be careful: birds are attracted to the planted seeds.

With a little work, your hillside too can bloom in a blaze of glory.

For more information, see the *Sunset Western Garden Book* and the University of California Davis websites:
<http://ucce.ucdavis.edu/files/datastore/268-304.pdf> or
<http://ucce.ucdavis.edu/datastore/datastoreview/showpage.cfm?usernumber=116&surveynumber=424>

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION



PLACER COUNTY

11477 E Avenue
Auburn, CA 95603
(530) 889-7385

E-Mail: ceplacer@ucdavis.edu

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NEVADA COUNTY

255 So Auburn
Grass Valley, CA 95945
(530) 273-4563

E-Mail: cenevada@ucdavis.edu

Placer County Hotline: (530) 889-7388. Visit us online at <http://pcmg.ucanr.org>