

California Poppy, *Eschscholzia californica*



California poppy is an attractive native wildflower that can be grown in the garden.

But this species has been transported to many other parts of the world, both as a garden plant and inadvertently. Once the California Gold Rush ended, miners set sail for new opportunities in Chile, New Zealand, and Australia. Using sand from the bluffs at San Francisco as ballast for their ships, they transported poppy seeds to these other places, where they have become a widespread weed.

The bright orange California Poppy (*Eschscholzia californica*) was named for doctor-naturalist Johann Friedrich Gustav von Eschscholtz (somehow the “t” in his name got dropped), who was the surgeon for the Russian expedition team that dropped anchor in San Francisco in 1815 in a bay surrounded by hills covered with the golden flowers. Early Spanish settlers called it *copa del ora* (cup of gold) after the legend that the orange petals, turning to gold, filled the soil with the precious metal. It was designated the state flower of California in 1903, and is now protected by state law prohibiting anyone from picking or destroying it.

Native to western North America, California poppy is the most widespread of the 15 species of *Eschscholzia* found in California. Its range extends from southwestern Washington State south to Baja California, and east to western Texas. The species is quite variable, and there are two subspecies recognized which interbreed freely in cultivation.



California poppy lines a road on Tenerife, Canary Islands where it is an invasive weed.



The desert poppy, *Eschscholzia parishii*, is a related species found in the Mojave and Colorado Deserts (here in Coyote Canyon near Borrego Springs, CA).

The desert poppy, *Eschscholzia parishii*, is an openly branched species with yellow flowers found on rocky slopes below 4,000 feet from the southern Mojave Desert to the Colorado Desert. It blooms in March and April. There are several other species in both desert and coastal habitats.

On the hillsides of California, California poppies tend to make their greatest shows on grazed lands since the animals avoid eating the bitter-tasting plants and eliminate most of the poppy's competition. Today, Southern California's best public poppy shows are in three locations: The "Grapevine," along Interstate 5 where it winds its way past Gorman at the northern edge of Los Angeles County; north of Lake Elsinor, off I-15 at the end of the Lake Street exit; and at the 1,700 acre high desert grassland area, Antelope Valley California Poppy Reserve in the Mojave Desert.



These short-live perennial plants in the poppy family (Papaveraceae) have attractive, finely divided and lacy bluish-green leaves. The plants only grow about 12 to 18 inches tall.

California poppies look good in masses.



The leaves of California poppy are bluish-green and finely divided.



The flowers have four satiny petals.

double or semi-double blossoms. Interestingly, in their native habitat California poppy is pollinated by beetles; this job has been taken over by the European honey

Tapered buds open into long-lasting flowers with 4 satiny petals arranged in a cup of 2 to 3 inches in diameter. They close at night or in cold, windy weather and open again the following morning, although they may remain closed in cloudy weather. The flowers of the species varies from dark yellow to orange, but plant breeders have expanded the range to include white, pale yellow, pink, purple, red and rose colors, and



Blooms close up in the evening or on cloudy days.

bee in other areas. Once pollinated, the petals fall away as narrow, ribbed seed pods three inches or longer form. Eventually the pod dries out and splits, shooting tiny, round, black seeds all over. To collect the seeds, gather ripe pods just as they are just beginning to split, place in an open container and allow them to dry for a few days before removing the seeds.



After pollination, the plant sets seed in elongated seed pods.

The indigenous California Indians used this poppy as both a source of food and medicine. Several groups boiled the plant, or roasted it on hot stones, to eat as a green. The Costanoan Indians rubbed a decoction of the flowers in the hair to kill lice; the Indians of Mendocino County used a poultice of fresh root for toothaches and a topically applied extract for headaches and sores; and Cahuilla women used the pollen as a cosmetic and the whole plant as a sedative for babies. Medicinally, California poppy is a plant with sedative, analgesic and antispasmodic activities, but unlike the alkaloids of the opium poppy, it does not seem to induce tolerance and dependence. It is touted by some for the treatment of anxiety and to induce sleep in patients affected with insomnia.



California poppy grows well in Wisconsin if given full sun and good drainage.

Despite its mild-weather origins, California poppy will grow quite happily in Wisconsin – as an annual. It can be used in beds, borders, and in naturalized areas, but generally does not do well in containers. The brilliant orange types work well with purple and yellow flowers, but may clash with some colors in the garden; yellow varieties combine well with blue cornflower and larkspur.

California poppies require full sun and good drainage to flourish, so are particularly well suited to rock gardens and dry, sandy soils. Because it develops a deep taproot they do not transplant well, and therefore should be seeded directly in the garden where you want them to grow. Although very small seedlings can be transplanted with care, self-seeded volunteers may be of inferior quality (particularly if they came from a hybrid variety).

Direct sow California poppy early in the spring, about the same time you would plant radishes. Rake the soil to prepare the seed bed, cover the seed about ¼ inch deep, and keep the soil moist after

planting until the seeds germinate in 1 to 3 weeks, depending on the temperature. Thin to about 12 inches apart. Decrease watering (if that's possible in our often rainy summers) after the plants begin to flower. Deadhead spent flowers to prolong blooming and enhance the appearance of the plant. Removing spent flowers and seed pods will also reduce re-seeding. Fertilization is not recommended as it promotes foliar growth over flowering.

There are many different varieties of California poppy. Some of the more common varieties include:

- 'Alba' has beautiful white flowers.
- 'Apricot Chiffon' is a double flowered variety with creamy yellow flowers edged with coral-orange.
- 'Apricot Flambeau' offers fiery shades of lemon, cream and apricot with intense, flame colored coral edges and smoky, grey-green foliage.
- The 'Ballerina' series has frilly, double flowers in shades of yellow, orange, rose and scarlet.
- 'Carmine King' offers flowers in shades of red and pink with white centers.
- 'Champagne & Roses' is a Thompson and Morgan introduction, with fluted flowers in shades of pink, from champagne to deep rose. The backs of the pale petals are a darker pink giving a two-tone effect.
- 'Golden West' has soft golden yellow flowers.
- 'Mission Bells' is a semi-double mix of pastel yellow, pink and orange with lightly ruffled petals.
- 'Orange King' is an improved variety of the species with earlier, longer lasting flowers of glowing orange.
- 'Purple Gleam' has satiny pink-purple flowers with cream centers.
- 'Red Chief' produces scarlet (orange-red) flowers.
- 'Rose Chiffon' has soft rose colored double blooms with yellow centers.
- 'Sugared Almonds' is a unique mix of shades from fiery scarlet-orange to cream with apricot blush.
- 'Thai Silk Mix' is a dwarf strain with 1½ inch ruffled, semi-double blooms in a showy mix of colors and bronze-tinted foliage.
- 'White Linen' is another white variety.



A pastel colored cultivar.

– Susan Mahr, University of Wisconsin - Madison

Additional Information:

- *Eschscholzia californica* – on the Missouri Botanic Garden's Kemper Center for Home Gardening website at <http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/PlantFinder/PlantFinderDetails.aspx?kempercode=b753>
- *Eschscholzia californica* – on the lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center website at http://www.wildflower.org/plants/result.php?id_plant=ESCA2
- California poppy (*Eschscholzia californica*) – USDA Forest Service Plant of the Week at http://www.fs.fed.us/wildflowers/plant-of-the-week/eschscholzia_californica.shtml