

An Alpine History Mystery – Solved!

A Native Name for a Native Shrub – Mystery Solved! December 2014

One of the most versatile native plants of California was used as a holly substitute by early settlers for holiday decorations. But this plant is much more than a home décor item; it is a favorite plant of wildlife enthusiasts, water-wise gardeners, wildfire recovery teams, and native plant enthusiasts. It is almost exclusively found in California, with only some minor overlapping in Southern Oregon and Northern Baja. Botanists call this plant *Heteromeles Arbutifolia*, but the indigenous Ohlone people of Central California and everyone who successfully solved this mystery call it by the common name of **Toyon**.

As a native of the chaparral region around Alpine, Toyon is naturally adapted to survive even the most severe drought. Although it may burn to the ground in a wildfire, it stores lots of energy in its large root burl which makes it one of the quickest plants to recover after the fire.

In the garden, Toyon is a versatile plant offering something of interest in every season. Its dark green saw-toothed leaves provide an interesting texture and with occasional summer watering this tall shrub fills out nicely to provide a dense backdrop to more showy plants. One of the great things about Toyon is that it attracts wildlife to the garden. In the early spring, a variety of birds will explore the garden looking for nesting sites and some will turn a large branching Toyon into home sweet home. Then as spring turns to summer, large clusters of small white flowers attract butterflies and bees with their yellow pollen and sweet nectar.



During the summer months, clusters of bright green berries begin to develop. In this early stage, the fruit contains a toxic cyanogenic glucoside (cyanide) that protects the fruit from foraging birds. But when the late autumn comes around the berries begin to change color to bright red – just in time for December holidays! During this time the cyanide migrates from the pulp into the seed, and the mature fruits become sweet and spicy. Native people in California used the berries for food and medicines, and Spanish settlers concocted a beverage from the fruit.



In the winter, when the berries darken to burgundy or black, many varieties of native birds gorge themselves on the fruit as it is an important source of food during the first months of the year. By this time in the fruit development cycle, the sweet and juicy berries have started fermenting, leading many observers to comment on the comical appearance of birds who have become a bit tipsy from consuming too much of the fermented fruit. After the fruit is consumed, the cycle begins again.