



The California poppy, *Eschscholzia californica*.

For the love of poppies

I begin this wildflower odyssey where it began for me, in the grassy open spaces of southern California. I was not born a botanist, but as I grew up, I gradually became aware of the changes that took place on the dry, dusty hillsides after the winter rains. The slopes first turned green, and then in places a bright golden orange as fields of California poppies began to bloom.

No flower symbolizes the flora of the “Golden State” more appropriately or dramatically than this gregarious spring annual, which is in fact the official state flower. Its formal name is a mouthful: *Eschscholzia californica*, named for Johann Friedrich von Eschscholtz, a citizen of the Russian Empire, but evidently of German descent. Eschscholtz was a biologist who participated in two exploratory expeditions to California in the early 19th century, along with the French/German botanist and poet Adelbert von Chamisso, who formally named the genus of poppies.



California poppies paint the dry hillsides near Elsinore, California, after winter rains.



The Matilija poppy, *Romneya coulteri*

The California poppy can be found throughout the state in areas with moderate rainfall, as well as in parts of neighboring states up to southern Washington and east into New Mexico. It has been spread additionally by wildflower enthusiasts within the U.S. and in other countries with similar climatic zones, including Chile, South Africa and Australia. To my disappointment, it does not seem to flourish in Florida gardens. The genus actually contains 12 recognized species, but none of the others are as common or flamboyant as *E. californica*.

The poppy family (Papaveraceae) is also represented in California by several other genera, including the spectacular Matilija poppy, *Romneya coulteri*, and a couple of species of the tree poppy, *Dendromecon*.



California poppies with *Calandrinia ciliata* in the Tehachapi mountains northeast of Los Angeles.

Though California poppies dominate in many places, they often co-exist with other species, including species of the ubiquitous legume genus, *Lupinus*. Some, including species of *Nemophila* and *Calandrinia*



Calandrinia ciliata (Portulacaceae) sometimes shares space with California poppies.



Amsinckia intermedia creates patches of lighter orange or yellow on the Tehachapi hillsides.



Amsinckia intermedia (Boraginaceae)

form an “understory” between poppy plants, and are only visible up close. *Amsinckia intermedia* can mingle with poppies or form its own rival displays.



Lupinus succulentus, one of many species of Lupines to be found in California.



Not a poppy! *Calochortus kennedyi* is actually in the Lily family (Liliaceae)



Nemophila menziesii (Boraginaceae) adds a touch of blue to California meadows, and is known as “baby blue eyes.”

One of the best places to see a spectacular display of poppies and other flowers of California's open spaces is the Antelope Valley California Poppy Reserve north of Los Angeles. You can see pictures and track the progress of the seasonal bloom on their website: http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=627



Orthocarpus, Owl's clover, in the Snapdragon family, is another denizen of rained-on open spaces in southern California



A *Nemophila* look-alike, *Sisyrinchium bellum* is in the Iris Family (Iridaceae)



A yarrow, genus *Achillea* in the sunflower family (Asteraceae) adds to the yellow hues of California's open spaces

Though I have been all over the world, the rain-transformed hillsides of southern California remain my favorite wild gardens of flowers.