Manzanita, a Landscape Dynamo
By Vera Strader

Manzanita has been a cornerstone of native California plant and animal life for millennia. Fossil records document its growth in central California along with the multitude of creatures that evolved along with it. It helped enrich and stabilize our soils, all the while honing its ability to adapt to diverse habitats. Botanically known as Arctostaphylos, to date 90 species including numerous varieties have been identified.

Manzanitas range from ground-huggers to tall, shapely trees. The majority, however, are shrubs. They are often supported by beneficial symbiotic mycorrhizal fungi that spread widely underground shuttling nutrients and water back and forth with neighboring plants. These mycorrhizae help boost manzanita's drought tolerance.

Once established, manzanitas become invaluable deer-resistant garden workhorses. Many are exceptionally drought tolerant with an aversion to frequent watering. Their ability to endure drought is often aided by thick and waxy leaves. They further reduce water loss by orienting the thinner edges of their evergreen leaves toward the sun.

Most manzanitas bloom during the winter with their flowers formed in ways to prevent late rains from washing away the pollen and nectar. Their downward hanging waxy blossoms shed moisture while providing early pollen and nectar for hungry birds and insects.

An early waystation for wildlife:

Hummingbirds are said to follow the manzanita blossoms as they migrate north in the spring while native bees also flock to this nectar buffet, frequently dining even during late showers. Bumblebees use their special ability to buzz the sticky pollen free from within the flowers, a process called sonification. Bumblebees accomplish this by gripping the blossom while vibrating their flight wings at approximately the middle C musical pitch. If you stand near a blooming manzanita, you may hear this unusual sound.

In their travels, insects and hummingbirds become covered in pollen and inadvertently pollinate blossoms as they move from plant to plant. Even European honeybees and some butterflies "steal" nectar by chewing into the base of the blossoms. This maneuver nourishes the insect but sidesteps the beneficial pollination process.

Columns of nutritious ants trek up the manzanita branches also in search of nectar. Flickers, oak titmice, and other bird species feast on these ants.

The berries produced by the fertilized manzanita blossoms feed literally dozens of small creatures including lizards, deer, squirrels, several kinds of rodents, foxes, even bears. Thus manzanita is sometimes called bearberry.

Birds too numerous to count, ranging from California quail, native sparrows, bluebirds, robins and mockingbirds also feast on the berries. The stems, leaves, buds, and flowers are munched by a number of creatures, and the manzanita branches provide nesting areas and cover for small animals.

Manzanita can be a genuine workhorse in our yards. Versatile and enduring, they blend our gardens with the hillsides and wilderness around us. Place manzanitas where they will receive good drainage and, depending on the species, most, or a full day of sunshine. Trim out deadwood as needed and rake fallen leaves to reduce wildfire danger.

When out shopping for natives, look for Actostapholos 'Howard McMinn,' probably the most durable and versatile of all manzanitas for planting in our yards. 'Howard McMinn' will, in time, will grow to a sizeable shrub. Also look for groundcovers, such as 'Emerald Carpet,' and 'Wood's Compacta.'

University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener Vera Strader of Tuolumne County grows four species of manzanita in her Sonora garden.