

## Edible Native Plants of San Francisco

Many edible plants are native to San Francisco and can easily be grown in pots and home gardens. Shallow rooted plants and bulbs thrive in pots. Perennials grown in pots need to be watered at least once/week. Pots with a combination of annuals and bulbs do not need summer water. Any plant that will thrive in a pot will also thrive in the ground.

### Plants for Dry, Sandy, or Serpentine Soil

Miner's lettuce (*Claytonia perfoliata*) is an annual with delicious edible leaves, white flowers, seeds, and stems. This is our native lettuce and is one of the easiest plants to grow. It will die back when the rainy season ends, so leave flowers to produce seed for next year's crop when the rain starts again. Miner's lettuce thrives in pots on north facing patios in shade and any soil. It will live in sun, but will die back more quickly than in shade.

Serpentine spring beauty (*Claytonia exigua* ssp. *exigua*) is an annual with edible leaves. It is specially adapted to serpentine soil.

California poppies (*Eschscholzia californica* and *maritima*) are annuals with delicious toasty-flavored edible seeds. Let some of its flowers produce seed for the following year. California poppies prefer some sun and any soil. The orange flowers attract bees throughout the bloom period which can range from spring through fall.

Clarkia (*C. purpurea*, *rubicunda* and *amoena*) has edible seeds with little taste. It is recommended, however, because the bees love it, and it has colorful pink blooms all summer.

Golden chia sage (*Salvia columbariae*) is an annual with edible leaves, bright blue flowers, and seeds. The bees love the blue blossoms.

Red maids (*Calandrinia menziesii*) is an annual with edible leaves. Red maids prefers sandy, fast draining soil.

Spring madia (*Madia elegans*) is an annual with edible seeds when they are roasted or parched.

Beach strawberry (*Fragaria chiloensis*) and woodland strawberry (*Fragaria vesca*) have edible fruit, though taste like a seedy strawberry. Summer water these potted perennials once/week. If these native strawberries are planted in the ground, summer water is not required. The white flowers attract bees in early spring. Beach strawberry grows well in semi-shady, fast draining sandy soil in areas like the Sunset and the Richmond. Woodland strawberry grows better in semi-shady slow-draining soil in areas like the Mission, Marina, and North Beach. Native strawberries are a lovely evergreen ground cover.

Crevice alumroot (*Heuchera micrantha*) has edible leaves when leaves are cooked, though has little taste. This plant is recommended, though, because bees love the cream colored flowers and is attractive in pots. Summer water this potted perennial once/week. When planted in the ground, summer water is not required.

Bluff lettuce (*Dudleya farinosa*) is a succulent with edible leaves. It prefers fast-draining sandy soil or being stuck in a rocky crevice in serpentine or chert hillsides.

Yellow Stonecrop (*Sedum spathulifolium*), a succulent, has edible leaves with little taste. Yellow stonecrop prefers fast-draining sandy soil or being stuck in a rocky crevice in serpentine or chert hillsides.

Elegant brodiaea (*Brodiaea elegans*) has edible flowers and bulb. The bulb needs to be cooked to be edible; the purple flowers are edible raw and taste like crispy lettuce. The beautiful flowers attract bees in late spring. Elegant brodiaea thrives in slow and medium-draining soil and can thrive in semi-shade.

Dwarf brodiaea (*Brodiaea terrestris* ssp. *terrestris*) has edible flowers and bulb. The bulb needs to be cooked to be edible; the purple flowers are edible raw and taste like crispy lettuce. The beautiful flowers attract bees in late spring. Dwarf brodiaea is specially adapted for serpentine and chert and can thrive in semi-shade.

Ithuriel's spear (*Triteleia laxa*) has edible flowers and bulb. The bulb needs to be cooked to be edible; the purple flowers are edible raw and taste like crispy lettuce. The beautiful flowers attract bees in the late spring. Ithuriel's spear thrives in slow and medium-draining soil and can thrive in semi-shade.

California onion (*Allium dichlamydeum* and *unifolium*) species have edible pink flowers, stems, leaves, and bulbs. *Allium unifolium* will propagate widely, so consider confining this bulb to a pot; if planting in the ground, dig it up and eat the some bulbs. The flowers attract bees in the late spring. Onions prefer slow-draining soil and full sun.

Note: For flowers the following year, permit bulb leaves to get brown and die back in the summer, and do not eat the bulb.

Yerba buena (*Clinopodium douglasii*) has delicious edible leaves that taste like a combination of oregano and mild mint. Yerba buena prefers shade plus a little summer water once/week to get it established. It loves fog and fog drip. Tiny white flowers attract bees in late May. Yerba buena thrives across San Francisco in all our soil types including slow-draining soil in areas like the Mission, Marina, and North Beach, as well as sandy soil in the Sunset. Yerba buena is a lovely evergreen ground cover.

Violets (*Viola adunca* ssp. *adunca* and *pedunculata*) have delicious edible leaves. One species has purple flowers, the other has yellow flowers. This shade loving ground cover is summer deciduous, which means that when it stops raining (or you stop watering), it goes dormant and the leaves die back. Violets return after the rains start again.

Manzanita (*Arctostaphylos* sp.) is available in many shapes and sizes including two ground cover species, *A. uva ursi* and "Emerald Carpet". The local species, *crustacea* ssp. *rosei* and c. ssp. *crustacea*, both need sandy soil and full sun. The small, white or pinkish lantern-shaped flowers are an important source of nectar for hummingbirds and queen bumblebees during winter. Manzanita berries are bland but are said to be tasty in punch.

Coyote mint (*Monardella villosa*) has edible minty leaves and lavender flowers. Coyote mint prefers full sun and some drainage. It grows more slowly in slow-draining soil.

Hummingbird sage (*Salvia spathacea*) has edible leaves, flowers, and seeds. Hummingbird sage's hot pink flowers taste like fruit punch. Every salvia has edible leaves and flowers, each species with a different taste. Native sage leaves can be used in cooking. Hummingbird sage is the only salvia that can live in some shade but needs at least a little sun to flower. Yes, hummingbirds love, love, love hummingbird sage.

## Shrubs and Trees

Thimbleberry (*Rubus parviflorus*) has delicious edible fruit that look like raspberries. Its white flowers attract bees. It is deciduous with soft leaves and no thorns. It spreads readily, so don't bother buying more than one plant, and plant only where it can spread. If you think you cannot grow anything, try thimbleberry. It wants to live in your garden. Thimbleberry prefers sunny damp areas, but also grows in shady, dry clay. The red berries are ripe for only one day; they are beige the day before they are ripe and dried the day after. So hang out in your garden at the end of June if you want to get the ripe berries before the birds. If these berries had a longer shelf life, you would see them in farmer's markets.

Pink flowering currant (*Ribes sanguineum* var. *glutinosum*) has tasty fruit. This deciduous shrub has early blooming pink flowers that are enjoyed by bees and hummingbirds. This shrub thrives in sandy or slow-draining soil and prefers some shade, so is perfect for the Sunset area.

Chaparral currant (*Ribes malvaceum*) has tasty fruit. This deciduous shrub has early blooming bright pink flowers that are enjoyed by bees and hummingbirds. This shrub thrives in sandy, draining soil as well as in serpentine or chert. Chaparral currant prefers some shade, so is perfect for the Sunset area and San Francisco's swath of serpentine that runs diagonally across the city.

Indian plum/osoberry (*Oemleria cerasiformis*) has edible fruit and white flowers. This shrub thrives in sandy, fast-draining soil and prefers shade, so is perfect for the Sunset area.

Hollyleaf cherry tree (*Prunus ilicifolia*) has edible fruit. This white flowered small tree requires sandy, fast-draining soil, so thrives in the Sunset area. Hollyleaf cherry, along with oak (*quercus*) and willow (*salix*) species, are the top local plants for supporting the greatest number of insect species.

Blue elderberry (*Sambucus nigra* ssp. *caerulea*) has edible fruit. This small deciduous tree has white flowers in the spring that attract tiny insects and early adult butterflies. The blue berries are tasty, sought out by both people and birds. This easy-to-grow edible plant thrives in both shade and sun and in any soil.

Coast barberry (*Berberis pinnata*) has edible tart fruit with pectin for pies. This tall narrow evergreen bush has bright yellow flowers in late winter and early spring, which are important early season food sources for bees and hummingbirds. It thrives in shade and sun and in any soil.

Coast live oak (*Quercus agrifolia*) has acorns that are edible when processed to remove their tannins, a long and tedious process. Local oak (*quercus*), cherries (*prunus*), and willow (*salix*) are the local plant genera that support the greatest number of insect species, so if you have room for this large, wide tree, then this is the best local tree to see wildlife. It needs some sun and some drainage, and is valuable for holding hills and anchoring its ecosystem. Coast live oak is the keystone plant in San Francisco's local oak woodland plant community.

<https://baynature.org/article/traditional-modern-methods-acorn-preparation/>

California Bay Laurel tree (*Umbellularia californica*) has edible leaves and nuts. This tall tree has light yellow flowers. Use about 1/3 of a leaf in recipes to substitute this native leaf for European bay leaves. The nuts have a complicated recipe associated with making them edible, which is worth making because the dried roasted nuts taste like a delicious combination of chocolate, hazelnuts, and coffee. *Umbellularia californica* deserves its own food movement. People react differently to the smell, so before you buy this plant, be sure to rub the leaf and smell it to make sure it is pleasant to you. *Umbellularia californica* thrives in any soil and needs some sun.

<https://paleotechnics.wordpress.com/2012/11/05/baynutting-tips-for-harvesting-storing-and-using-california-bay-nuts/>

## Plants for Damp or Wet Soil

San Francisco edible plants that need a damp area or regular water also tend to be tolerant of any soil type as long as the plants get regular and/or extra water. Most local native plants that need extra water were understory plants for our local willow, *Salix lasiolepis*. These understory plants thrive in conditions somewhere between a lot of shade and total shade:

Western wild ginger (*Asarum caudatum*) has delicious spicy-sweet edible raw roots and dark red flowers. It likes deep shade (as dark as possible) plus consistently damp areas. Western wild ginger is a lovely dark evergreen ground cover.

Monkey Flower Savory (*Clinopodium mimuloides*) has minty edible leaves and red tubular minty flowers. It likes shade and damp areas. Hummingbirds love this plant.

## Shrubs and Trees

Huckleberry (*Vaccinium ovatum*) has delicious edible fruit. The fruit of this blueberry relative tastes more delicious and complex than blueberries. Fresh huckleberries taste as if an east coast blueberry went on a 5-hour wine tasting trip. Bees love the white flowers. It likes shade and damp areas, and grows slowly. We rarely recommend garden selections of a plant, but the “Blue Madonna” selection flowers and fruits heavily and is worth every penny to get more fruit. Huckleberry bushes need a little sunlight to flower and fruit.

California hazelnut (*Corylus cornuta* ssp. *californica*) has delicious edible nuts. According to research, you'll need two plants of different varieties to get nut production. These small deciduous trees have a lovely open form and vase shape without much pruning. This wind pollinated plant has very small red flowers on the female plant and lovely tassels on the male plant.

Salmonberry (*Rubus spectabilis*) fruits are edible but could take years to be produced. Although it is reputed to do well in shade, it doesn't fruit unless it gets a little bit of sun. Birds love the fruit and bees love the showy hot pink flowers.

## Further information

Please collect only edible parts from plants from your own garden or where you have permission. Collect only 30% of any of your own plants so that some remains to feed wildlife and to grow the next year. Wild plants thrive best when left alone.

### References and Resources:

Calscape is CNPS's plant selection tool. It includes plant description, wildlife it supports, lepidoptera and insect relations, and landscaping information for native plants. <https://www.calscape.org/>

Daniel Moerman's book *Native American Ethnobotany* is a compilation of more than 4000 North American plants and their uses by local indigenous tribes for food, medicine, tools and domestic needs. <http://naeb.brit.org/>  
<https://www.workman.com/products/native-american-ethnobotany>

Doug Tallamy's books, website, and YouTube talks have more information about how native plants support insect species. <http://www.bringingnaturehome.net/>

California Native Plant Society - Yerba Buena chapter

<http://cnps-yerbabuena.org/>