



SARATOGA HORTICULTURAL FOUNDATION, INC.

15185 Murphy Avenue
San Martin, CA 95046
(408) 779-3303

Romneya coulteri

The Matilija Poppy is one of the most spectacular flowering plants of the Californian floristic province. It is a plant which has long been cultivated and admired in Europe, but has not been as widely used in California as it deserves. Its large, spreading white flowers with the central boss of yellow stamens are produced in profusion, on established plants, throughout the second half of the summer.

It occurs, in limited areas, inland on the slopes of the sea coast ranges from Santa Barbara Co. south to San Diego Co. and on into northern Baja. It is probably seen at its most spectacular in Ventura Co. behind Ojai. It grows at elevations of up to 4,000 feet on hot, dry exposed sites on the steep sides of dry washes in sparsely vegetated areas of rocky, loose, gravelly soils, but it can also be found in coastal sage scrub and chaparral communities. Although hot and dry during the day, these areas are subject to fog at night which mitigates the apparently harsh conditions. In the wild it is a sparse growing shrub with relatively small leaf size which reflects the dryness of its habitat.

Romneyas are suffrutescent in habit - the herbaceous stems arising from the rootstock during the spring, these then flower during the summer months and eventually become woody and tattered, but persist for a further season without flowering, before dying off. This growth is capable of achieving a height of 10 to 12 feet in moist, well drained conditions in deep soil but more usually it attains only 5 to 8 feet. It is an invasive plant, with a stoloniferous habit, which is capable of colonising even very hard and compacted soil conditions by its penetrating rhizomes.

The stems arise from the rootstock after the winter rains, they are blue green and carry dissected leaves of the same colour which vary in shape from pinnate to partly divided; just before midsummer the branches become more twiggy in habit and each of these stems develops a solitary terminal flower bud. These open during the summer months, just after dawn with the three sepals falling away thus exposing the crumpled petals, these expand during the day and eventually last for several days. The flowers have six white, crepe paper textured petals which surround a central boss of numerous golden yellow stamens. Each flower can be six to eight inches across and is delicately fragrant, reminiscent of Magnolia.

The stems and leaves contain a bitter juice which protects the plant against grazing - a typical adaptation of plants

from chapparal and sage scrub communities. Because of its rhizomatous habit its growth can be patchy under compacted soil conditions although once established one plant can invade enormous areas.

The Matilija Poppy is commonly referred to a single species Romneya coulteri, but some authorities divide the genus on very limited differences into two species and accept R. trichocalyx as a separate entity. Are there really two species or are there merely two variations on a theme? The flowers of both species are virtually indistinguishable. The theoretical differences in characters between the two are, variously, that the buds of R. trichocalyx are round (not beaked), that the calyx is bristly and that the flower stalks are leafy: it is suggested that R. trichocalyx is more compact in growth and habit, is hardier, is earlier in its flowering season and that it is more spreading and invasive than R. coulteri - because of an extended rhizome production. It would appear that R. coulteri is the common form in the Santa Ana Mountains and that it does not extend down into Baja California, R. trichocalyx is therefore more widespread. A survey of wild populations would probably find that these distinctions are not entirely constant and that other combinations may occur where both variants grow.

Despite their limited and specialised habitat Romneyas are remarkably capable of adapting to a wide variety of situations in cultivation. They are very well suited to those dry gardening conditions which are currently in vogue but will also tolerate and flourish under irrigated conditions provided that drainage is sharp (they will not tolerate waterlogging) and dry atmospheric conditions are maintained during the day i.e. they should not be shaded. The plant will develop a fuller and larger leaved habit with a more intense blue colour when water is available. However due care should be observed in siting these plants because of their invasive habit and they should be planted in a position where their spread may be constrained. In a dry garden context they will require to be watered until they are well established. In order to encourage strong annual stems for flowering and to maintain a tidy plant it would be prudent to prune the plant back to more or less ground level during the winter.

The cultivar 'White Cloud' is a supposed hybrid between the two species(?) it has exceptionally bushy growth with very heavy flower production over a long season. It is reputed that this selection was made by Louis Edmonds from his Danville nursery and that it is the same plant that is also distributed as the 'Louis Edmonds form'.

'Butterfly' is a selection from Mike Smith of Wintergreen Nursery at Corralitos and is characterised by large flowers with unusually broad overlapping, slightly undulate petals.