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WHY THE ESCHSCHOLTZIA

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WHY THE ESCHSCHOLTZIA?

EDWARD LEE GREENE

Doubtless our sunny plains, shady cañons and mountain forests yield types of floral beauty more delicate than the *Eschscholtzia* and some of them equally characteristic of California; why then should this poppy-like flower have been selected as the State's floral emblem?¹ The snow plant of the Sierra—stem, leaves, flowers and all of the richest crimson—is peculiar to California and the subject of universal and unbounded admiration. The lily family, an alliance of plants abounding in flowers of signal beauty and elegance, has plenty of distinctly Californian types not excelled by their relatives of other parts of the world. The lilies themselves, as they adorn our mountain woods and stream banks, might have furnished a State flower; or, even more appropriately, their near ally, the *Calochortus*, or butterfly tulip, or *Mariposa* lily, as it is popularly called. These, with our *Brodiaeas* and other lily-like flowers, are coveted throughout the world by flower growers as among the most surpassingly beautiful of all the plants indigenous to California. Even the blue and white and purple-flecked *Nemophilas*, or their kindred, the *Phacelias*, whose masses of bloom impart to our wheat fields in March the hues of the sky overhead, might have furnished a good floral emblem.

But the State flower must be that of a plant more generally disseminated throughout our commonwealth, more conspicuous—in a word, more popular than any of these. The *Sarcodes*, or snow plant, gorgeously beautiful though it be, is limited to the woods of the upper Sierras, where in its native vigor and freshness, perhaps not more than one in a thousand among us will ever behold it. And it steadily refuses to be cultivated; moreover, it is after all only a splendid parasite, and California is not a parasite State. The delicate yet brilliant *Mariposas* put forth their white, or red or yellow pendants in the shade of thickets, or among the more inaccessible places of the mountains. They are matchless among our wild flowers, in both form and coloring, but they are too select and retiring for popularity. The grain field flowers of spring, painting whole landscapes, are both short lived and local. They are of the great interior valleys but not of the whole State.

All the prerequisites of an acceptable floral emblem for California meet in the *Eschscholtzia*. It is a plant of singular beauty. The delicately-cut foliage, the graceful stem, the satin-like luster of the golden petals—all these combine to make such a plant as flower lovers in all parts of the world have prized highly ever since the

¹ This article was written to serve as part of the general observance which took place in 1890 on the occasion of the adoption of the *Eschscholtzia* as the state flower of California by vote of the California Floral Society and other public organizations. By act of the legislature of California in 1903 the *Eschscholtzia* became officially the state flower of California. So far as we know this article has never been printed in any magazine of botany or horticulture.—W. L. J.

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time of its first discovery. It is distinctively Californian. There is no *Eschscholtzia* indigenous to any island of the sea or any continent but North America; and even here it is confined to the Pacific Coast, where it is well-nigh exclusively Californian. While a single species illuminates the plains of northern Mexico in early spring, and another extends northward to the valley of the Columbia, all the rest are strictly Californian. And within the State they are of more universal distribution than almost any other of our native flowers. The great desert of the Rio Colorado has its peculiar *Eschscholtzia*, and that quite different physical region, the Mojave, has two species, one of them with flowers so small that none but a botanist would be likely to recognize it at first glance as of this genus. Another sort adorns the San Diego seaboard hills; and still another—and this is the original *Eschscholtzia Californica*—enlivens our northern coasts from Monterey to San Francisco. Both the plains and the foothills of our great interior valleys present in many places in the month of April vast landscapes largely orange-colored by the profusion of the handsomest of all the species, *Eschscholtzia crocea*. Still another sort, a small and close-tufted plant with flowers of lighter yellow, occupies the hill country of our more northerly districts; and this species drew the attention of the mining pioneers of forty years ago, springing up as it did and unfolding its yellow flowers abundantly on every dump newly made by the pick and spade of the gold-seekers. And men pressed the brilliant corollas and sent them in letters home to the east and called them the “California Gold Flower”. It was a name most naturally suggested to their minds by both the habitat and the hue of the petals which might well have been retained as a popular one for these plants. It was at a later period, and only by help of the botanists, who knew the plant to be of the poppy family, that the name of California poppy came into use. It is not a very good name, inasmuch as it is hardly a natural one. The affinities of the *Eschscholtzia* are with the poppies, no doubt; but the external resemblance is so slight that none but a professional botanist would have been likely to detect the relationship.

As a popular name *Eschscholtzia* will, perhaps, always continue to be objectionable; a college course in German seeming to be almost necessary to either an understanding or a correct pronunciation of it. But this, like every other scientific plant-name, has a history; and, to those who know the history, a fitness. A brief sketch of the origin of this name *Eschscholtzia* may, perchance, commend it to the scorner of Teutonian polysyllabics in general.

Seventy-five years ago our State floral emblem had neither a name nor place in the lists of either botanists or florists. Two years since at the German capital they unveiled to the public a statue of an eminent traveler, botanist and man of letters, Adelbert von Chamisso; and it was he who had the happiness of discovering in California, and of introducing into Europe, this most characteristic of our California plants. In the year 1816 this man, then a youth, in company with his intimate friend, John Frederic Eschscholtz, during

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successive October days rambled over what must have been bleak and desolate hills where now stands the city of San Francisco. They were both fresh from university halls, and, as young men of promise, had received appointments from the Russian Emperor to accompany Lieutenant Kotzebue on his voyage of discovery. Eschscholtz was surgeon and zoologist to the expedition, Chamisso was botanist, and upon their return from the voyage, Chamisso made known to the botanical and floricultural world the most beautiful of their new acquisitions, the California poppy-like flower, dedicating it to his friend and companion of the voyage, the young Dr. Eschscholtz.

Berkeley, Dec. 3, 1890.



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