

Shedding Light on the Gold

Last weekend was the [Theodore Payne Foundation](#) Garden Tour. It was wonderful showing off my garden and speaking with like-minded nature lovers. And the volunteer docents provided by Theodore Payne Foundation were excellent - knowledgeable, fun, and helpful. Thanks to Jennifer and Anita!

Anyway, during the day I was asked which native plant in my garden was my favorite, not including coast live oaks. I had a hard time but was prompted to answer with flannel bush. You see my Fremontodendrons were in full, exquisite bloom. I demurred, noting that I am afraid to love them too much.

You see they are finicky. When they are doing well, they are doing great! But, when they aren't, they don't linger, they just drop-dead with no muss and no fuss. This kind of ending is all too common.

They are particularly averse to summer water. Mine are growing in delightful, loamy soil next to the backyard lawn (yes, I have lawn). A sign posted next this spectacular shrub informed the public that I was going to move the lawn edge further away from the flannel bush and never, ever water it in the summer. Still, these are not ideal conditions and it is very likely my fabulous flannel bush will depart suddenly, sooner rather than later (I'm just sayin').

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In any event all of this interest in these breathtaking shrubs got me researching the genus, species and available cultivars. So here's my quick primer on *Fremontodendron*.

There are two species in California: *F. californicum* and *F. mexicanum*.

There are two subspecies of *F. californicum*: *ssp. californicum* and *ssp. decumbens*. The former has a large range, covering most of the state except for Desert and Great Basin Provinces (Jepson), and it is variable in many ways. It is variable in size, ranging from 5 to 20 ft tall or more, shape, leaf size, and even flower size. Flower color varies from bright yellow to orangy-yellow.

F. c. ssp. decumbens has a very small range, being found only in the foothills of the High Sierra, Pine Hill, El Dorado County. It has a mounding habit, usually less than 4 ft. tall, spreading to twice as wide often with trailing stems and blue-green leaves.

The second species, *F. mexicanum* is limited in range to California Peninsular Ranges in San Diego County, but is also found in Baja California. It grows as an upright tree to 25 feet in height with stiff, angled branches, and larger flowers that bloom intermittently over a longer period than *F. californicum*.

There are several cultivars that are hybrids of *F. californicum* and *F. mexicanum*.

1. California Glory, selected at RSABG, is presumed to be a hybrid of these two species. It was named and introduced in 1962, and has won awards from both the California and the Royal Horticultural Societies. It can grow to 20 feet in height and wider, is fast growing, and floriferous in the extreme.
2. Pacific Sunset, another RSABG hybrid, was produced by controlled hybridization from seed in 1950. Also twenty feet in height and up to forty feet in width, its flowers have a bit more orange than the similar San Gabriel named cultivar.
3. San Gabriel, also produced by controlled hybridization from seed, is similar in size but has clear yellow flowers.

California Glory flannel bush at RSABG.



Cultivars have also been created from crossing *F. californicum* ssp. *decumbens* with California Glory.

1. Ken Taylor, named by Nevin Smith in 1981, and produced and selected by Saratoga Horticultural Foundation and others has orange-yellow blooms, and a lower cascading form.

Ken Taylor in Cultivar Garden at RSABG in spring 2009.



Ken Taylor along uphill path from entrance to Garden Shop at Rancho. This has been here as long as I can remember.

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2. El Dorado Gold, four to six feet in height and double in width, has yellow orange flowers, small dark green leaves and may be the most suited to garden conditions.

3. West Hills Hybrid has an uncertain history with involvement of Western Hills Nursery, Wintergreen Nursery and others. It reaches up to six feet in height, and wider, growing with an interesting layered, almost pagoda-shaped form, with deep orange-gold flowers with blue-green leaves. It is one of my favorites.

West Hills Hybrid - deep, dusty green leaves and rusty gold flowers.

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Reaching about 6 ft. in height, horizontal limbs give it an interesting form.



Santa Barbara Botanic Garden introduced Dara's Gold, another low growing flannel bush, more appropriate in size for garden. This plant is a cross between *F. californicum* ssp. *decumbens* and the tree-like, *F. mexicanum*. It was developed by horticulturist Dara Emery in 1970 and grows to three feet in height and double or more in width, carrying wide, bright yellow flowers.

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So with all of this lead up, now I'd like to show you the two flannel bushes growing in my yard and ask if anyone out there can tell me what they are. You see, one had a California Glory label and the other had a different label that I can't find. Not only that, but I'm not sure which one had the label (typical!). To be fair, Bart O'Brien, from [Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden](#), had a look at both and gave me his opinion (which I have found to be, in **almost** all cases, correct). Maybe we can prove him wrong, even though my followup research indicates we probably won't get him this time. Tell me what you think.

North flannel bush on left, East flannel bush on right.

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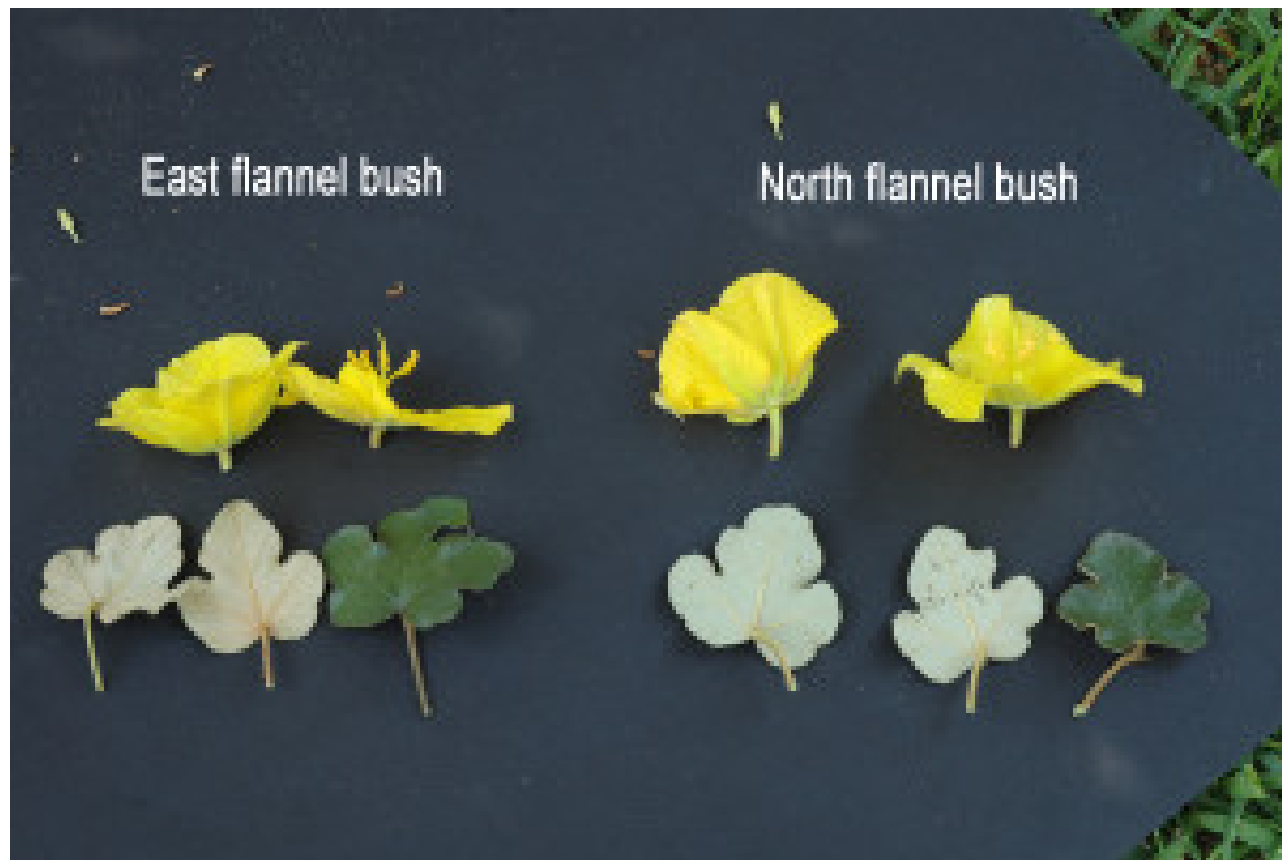
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Summary of differences between North and East flannel bushes:

North shrub:

1. Branches less stiff, herring bone pattern.
2. From a distance shrub looks less orange, flowers more clear yellow in color.
3. Underneath side of leaves have mostly white hairs.
4. Petioles beneath sepals are longer.
5. Leaf petioles often slightly twisted.

East shrub:

1. Stiffer, straighter branches.
2. From a distance both shrub looks more orangy, and flowers slightly goldier in color.
3. Underneath side of leaves have rusty colored hairs.
4. Petioles beneath sepals are shorter.
5. Leaf petioles mostly straight.

And finally, in answer to the question, what is my favorite? I'd have to say toyon (*Heteromeles*

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arbutifolia). Nothing too fancy but the red berries in late fall are seasonally cheerful, and it is a durable, hard working shrub that in a mere five years has screened a view I prefer not to see.

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