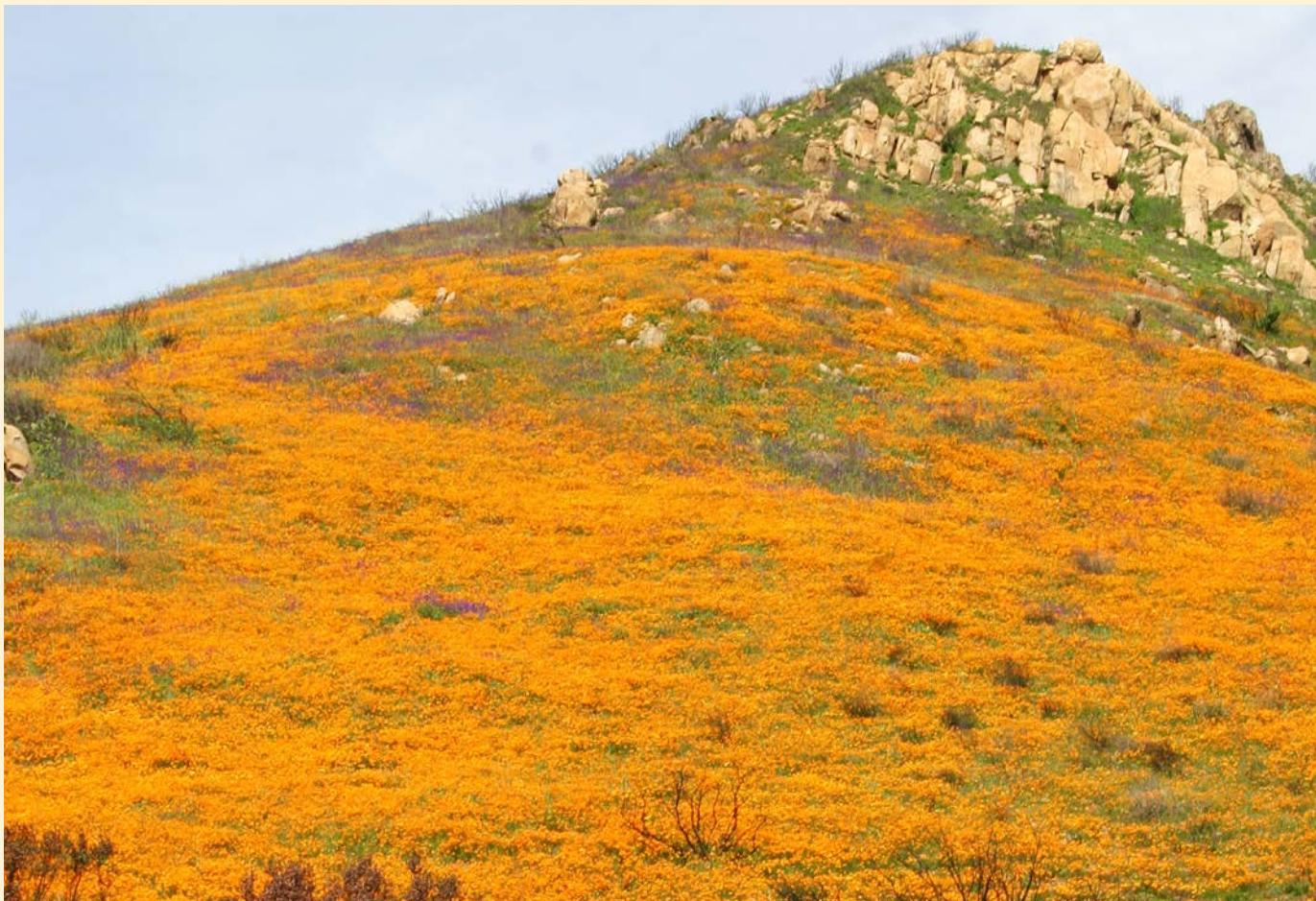


California Poppies Bloom *en masse* after Wild Fire

Web special for "All-American Poppies" by Nan Sterman published in July/August 2017 issue of The American Gardener, the magazine of the American Horticultural Society.



California poppy seeds can stay dormant in the soil for years, even decades, so occasionally, there is an unexpected mass poppy bloom. I witnessed such an event in 2008. In the fall of 2007, San Diego County suffered huge, devastating wild fires. That next spring, I passed along a road that cuts through chaparral-covered hillsides in the watershed of a man-made dam. Usually, its east-facing slopes are covered first in the bright white, and later in the deep blue, flowers of California lilac (*Ceanothus* sp.).

That spring after the fires, there weren't any California lilac flowers. Only charred skeletons of these shrubs remained. But rather than the moonscape I expected to see, those east-facing hills were covered—smothered really—in the tell-tale orange of California poppies. The scene was astounding, with acres and acres of golden orange poppies.

By then, I'd lived in the area for more than 20 years and had never seen those hills blooming with wildflowers. And neither had anyone else in that timeframe. It was a once-a-generation event. Of course I pulled over and crossed the very busy road to walk a fire trail as high into the hillside as I could. At the top was an incredible sea of poppies.

I returned several times over the next few weeks and each time, there were more and more people visiting the spot, which was not easy to get to. Where the fire road ended, the hill became very steep but that was where the best bloom was. I marveled at how determined people were to be up there with the flowers; young couples with babies in backpacks and toddlers by the hand, elderly people who looked as if they could barely climb in and out of a car, let alone hike a quarter mile fire road and up a steep hillside, and, most confounding, young women in short shorts and spiked heels.

The bloom lasted for maybe a month before it faded with the heat. By the following year, the chaparral started to regenerate and there was just a sprinkling of poppies. The next year, there was no hint of them. Still today, when I drive that road in spring, I look up into the hillsides to wonder about the seed bank the poppies left behind and how long it will be before those hills will be covered in orange once again.

—Nan Sterman

Above: In spring 2008, California poppies burst into bloom on the hillsides of San Diego County after wild fires had swept through the previous fall (below).

photos by Nan Sterman

