

*The next monthly general meeting is Monday, August 15, 2016, at 7:15 PM*

Monthly meetings are held at the San Francisco County Fair Building, Ninth Avenue at Lincoln Way in Golden Gate Park.

Free parking is available behind the San Francisco County Fair Building on Lincoln Way.

4:00 PM – Botanical gardens walk with the featured speaker. Meet outside the entrance gate to the San Francisco Botanical Garden. New rules require that if you do not enter with the California Horticultural Society as a group, you will need to pay, or be a member of the Garden if you are not a San Francisco resident. So be on time..

5:30 PM – No-host dinner will take place at Park Chow Restaurant, located at 1240 Ninth Avenue in San Francisco.

7:15 PM – Announcements, Plant Forum, and Program Meeting will be held at the San Francisco County Fair Building. Cal Hort members may attend for free.

**Plant of the Month**  
*Origanum syriacum*



### MONDAY, AUGUST 15, 2016

#### Bromeliads for Bay Area Landscapes

by Dan Arcos

Dan Arcos will take a look at which bromeliads have proven hardy outdoors in Bay Area Gardens and how they can be used. He will also talk about their general culture and the differences between terrestrial and epiphytic types.



### MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 19, 2016

#### Uncommon Plants for Mediterranean Gardens

by Ernesto Sandoval

Ernesto Sandoval has been gardening for over 25 years and as a result of his work at the UC Davis Botanical Conservatory, he's been exposed to a variety of plants that are fairly uncommon in our gardens. He will share an assortment of plants that are very suitable for the varied flavors of our Mediterranean climate including a few showy *Aloes* and other xerophytes, as well as other notables such as *Acacia hindsii*, *Calliandra californica*, *Capparis spinosa*, and *Mirabilis multiflora*.

## Plant of the Month

by Arcangelo Wessells

*Origanum syriacum*

Za'atar or Syrian Oregano

Family: LAMIACEAE

I was introduced to Za'atar by my friend Bru. He doesn't drive but things come to him. He was probably given some Za'atar by the family who run the town's grocery store. Their relatives in Jordan had sent it to them. We made snowshoe naan at Christmas and sprinkled it with Za'atar.

Five years ago, I doubt many people had heard of Za'atar. It is a plant, but it is more well known as a blend of herbs and spices from the Middle East. (Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan and Israel, although it is eaten in many other places). It most likely became popular in foodie parts of America through the cookbooks of Yotam Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi. The seasoning blend is relatively straightforward: sesame seeds, sumac, salt and the herb Za'atar. This is usually translated as thyme, but in Arabic there are actually several plants called Za'atar which can be used to make the condiment. These include *Satureja thymbra*, *Thymbra spicata*, *Thymbra capitata* (which may be a synonym for *Thymus capitatus* and *Satureja capitata*), *Origanum syriacum* and even *O. vulgare*.

I unexpectedly found seeds of *Origanum syriacum* or "Marjoram, Syriaca Zaatar" in the Seeds of Change catalog in the winter of 2010. I was thrilled. *Oreganos* are generally attractive plants, but I had no concern for what the plant would look like. I wanted to cook with it. Since then I have found seeds of *Thymbra spicata* and *Thymus capitatus*, but have not succeeded in growing it yet.

The seeds of *Origanum syriacum* germinated pretty easily, even though I think I planted them in February. I have since found that volunteers appear earlier in the year with our winter rains. The foliage is surprisingly soft and hairy. The leaves are thicker than those of Marjoram (*Origanum majorana*) but not as stiff and grey as Dittany of Crete (*O. dictamnus*). Soft hairs disguise the serrated edges of the leaves, which are ovate or elliptic, and almost an inch long. The fragrance and flavor of the leaves is milder and cooler than common Oregano.

Syrian Oregano plants grow about six inches tall in their first year. Za'atar spreads a bit, but the clumps are not much more than a foot wide at the base. They will



be two or three years old before they begin to flower. In late spring the stems will start to lengthen. The stems are fairly substantial, and as with many other *Oreganos*, they begin green and leafy. The stems reach about one foot in height before developing any buds. The stem leaves and the inflorescence bracts develop thick wool to cope with summer sun and heat. This gives the blooming plant an overall gray-green look. Za'atar stems are about thirty inches tall when they bloom, and the flowers are presented in the top half of the plant. While Marjoram also puts out a lot of flowering stems during the same period, those stems remain leafy and crowded, with tight inflorescences and less visual impact. As summer progresses, Za'atar loses its basal and lower stem leaves, exposing its thick stems. Although these stems are woody, they still tend to lean over unless they are growing into or through another plant.

The ends of the stems have four or five secondary branchlets of flower heads. These branchlets are arranged in opposite pairs, and each has an inflorescence shaped like a jack, or any of the letters Y, V or X. The wooly bracts are grouped in dense cylindrical formations 3/16 of an inch across. They are one half inch long, in angular clusters of up to five, with numerous tiny white flowers protruding from all sides. The blossoms are small but contribute to the overall silvery, lacy character that the plant has. The flowers have a sweeter and milder scent than the leaves.

August can be a grim time in a barely watered garden. Syrian Oregano almost doesn't have enough leaves to be useful. It may seem very unimpressive with its twiggy base and flopping flowerheads, but when the sun comes out and

## Mid Summer HORTICULTURAL EVENTS

insects start to notice the plant it is really amazing. I recorded eighteen species of nectar seeking visitors in the span of five minutes before running out of paper on which to record them. Eight species of bees. Eight wasps including three different spider hunters, one of which was over an inch and a half long. A few unusual flies and a Milkweed Bug. Some of these insects have never been seen when the Za'atar wasn't in bloom. All in five minutes!

The plant blooms for at least two or three months, from June through late August. Even when I have trimmed the plant to try to prevent reseeding, it was too late. It self-sows. Volunteer seedlings are distinctive and fuzzy, so they can be transplanted, shared or removed. Mature plants will be twiggy and dry looking but can easily be pruned hard to the ground in late fall to make room for new growth. Mature plants don't develop such extensive underground growth as *Origanum vulgare*, but they can still be divided easily and successfully.

I grow *Origanum syriacum* in a dry bed of the open garden. I grow it near a Woolly Blue Curly, and a friend has it planted with Catnip. It requires very little water; once a week is plenty. It might be happy with more frequent watering, as long as the drainage is pretty good.

No insect or pest has ever bothered my plants. Za'atar likes full sun. It can tolerate shade in the morning, but I would avoid planting it in afternoon shade.

Seeds of Za'atar are easy to find. They are sold by Baker Creek (rareseeds.com) as well as by strictlymedicalseeds.com, which used to be called Horizon Herbs. Plants can sometimes be found in retail nurseries.



### INTRODUCTION TO PROPAGATION: PROPAGATION BY LEAF

*Saturday, August 13; 10:30 AM–NOON*

Ruth Bancroft Garden, 1552 Bancroft Road, Walnut Creek

Assistant Curator Walker Young will lead this session for beginner enthusiasts. You will learn to take cuttings properly and propagate with leaves. Pre-registration is required for this workshop. \$25; members \$20. (925) 944-9352 or send the registration form with check or credit card information to 1552 Bancroft Road, Walnut Creek, CA 94598.

### ADVANCED TECHNIQUES IN PROPAGATION

*Saturday, August 13; 1:30–3:00 PM*

Ruth Bancroft Garden, 1552 Bancroft Road, Walnut Creek

Assistant Curator Walker young will lead this session for more experienced enthusiasts focusing on advanced propagation techniques. Pre-registration is required for this workshop. \$25; members \$20. (925) 944-9352 or send the registration form with check or credit card information to 1552 Bancroft Road, Walnut Creek, CA 94598.

### HELL STRIP GARDENING

*Saturday, August 20; 8 AM–NOON*

Ruth Bancroft Garden, 1552 Bancroft Road, Walnut Creek

What to do with that overlooked spot between the curb and the sidewalk? Join us for a hands-on workshop where we will tackle a troublesome spot and add curb appeal with a drought tolerant landscape. Pre-registration is required for this workshop. \$45; members \$35. (925) 944-9352 or send the registration form with check or credit card information to 1552 Bancroft Road, Walnut Creek, CA 94598. This workshop will be held offsite and information will be sent to you after registration.

### MEDITERRANEAN CLIMATE PERENNIALS

*Saturday, September 10; 10 AM–NOON*

Markham Nature Park and Arboretum, 1202 La Vista Avenue, Concord  
Join Susan Handjian for an overview of the beautiful but tough perennial plants from the world's Mediterranean climates. You'll learn about the characteristics that make Mediterranean perennials so tough and resilient. In addition to "right plant right place" plant selection, Susan will also cover the often overlooked but very important topic of maintenance. Many of the plants featured in the class will be available at Markham's plant sale on September 17. Registration is required. Class limited to 15 people.



**California Horticultural Society**  
 San Francisco County Fair Building  
 Ninth Avenue and Lincoln Way  
 San Francisco, CA 94122

[www.calhortsociety.org](http://www.calhortsociety.org)

**Plant Drawing News**

Each month various nurseries and individual members donate plants for the plant drawing. Please do not hesitate to bring in unusual plants from you garden to share with the members. Also remember the meeting is an excellent place to find plants for your garden that you have never seen before.

**Monthly Plant Display and Discussion**

Each month there is a lively discussion about plants brought in by our members. It may be a well-grown specimen or an unusual discovery, or a plant that has attributes that are not known by the mainstream. If you are interested in participating, bring in a plant to show to the group. You can also donate this plant afterwards to the plant drawing.

To join the California Horticultural Society or to find out about a full range of membership levels, please visit our web site at [www.calhortsociety.org](http://www.calhortsociety.org).

Questions from members about your membership? Please address them to the Cal Hort membership chair: Charlotte Masson, 579 Los Paltos Drive, San Francisco, CA 94127-2209.

The California Horticultural Society has maintained its quality programs because of the dedication of the volunteer officers, chairs and members. The future of the Society depends upon its member volunteers to provide leadership. The Board asks that members volunteer for positions to keep Cal Hort the best organization it can be.

**COUNCIL**

2015-2017 (First Term) Mark Delepine, Steve Morse, Andy Stone  
 2016-2018 (Second Term) Ellen Edelson, Charlotte Masson, Kristin Yanker-Hansen  
 2016–2018 (First Term) Mary Engle, Bart O'Brien, Arcangelo Wessells

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Deadline for publication in this Bulletin is the third Monday of each month for the following month's Bulletin; no Bulletin is published in December. Events during the first ten days of the month should be submitted two months ahead.