



SHOUT SUNSHINE

It's easy to create dazzling summer beauty in your garden with the most brilliantly coloured of all annuals – California poppies, as **Graham Rice** reveals. Photography by Tim Sandall

THE VERY PHRASE 'California poppy' seems to shout sunshine. Blazing in short grassland and rocky habitats from the Pacific shore to high in the Rocky Mountains, California poppy, *Eschscholzia californica*, is among the most brilliantly coloured of all annuals.

Wild California poppies tend to have flowers in vivid yellows and orange shades, with lacily-divided green leaves, but they vary enormously. More than 90 wild varieties and subspecies have been described. Characteristics occasionally found in wild plants have been combined with new features by plant breeders in creating the recent impressive range of exciting cultivars.

Easy to grow, drought-tolerant and now available in so many more colours and flower forms – California poppies have been transformed into stylish summer flowers. Many cultivars, with unusually attractive, prettily-dissected bluish or silvery foliage, appeal even before they bloom.

In the garden

Most annual poppies can be fleeting in flower, but altering the way California poppies are grown can extend their flowering season from weeks to months. They can be treated as hardy annuals all over Britain. Traditionally they are sown in the open ground, where they are to flower, in spring, then thinned out and, after a blaze of colour, cleared away.

Two or three successive sowings can extend the period of flower, but larger, longer-flowering plants develop from seed that germinates in late summer or early autumn. As with many annuals from Mediterranean-type climates,

starting to develop a root system in the autumn promotes more prolific flowering the following year.

Also, these plants may behave as short-lived perennials, developing a deep taproot and a semi-woody structure at the base, allowing them to persist for two or three years. A downside of this taprooted structure is that it is tricky to raise from seed indoors: compost tends to fall from the roots while potting on.

Sowing seed outside, in late summer or autumn, provides the most prolific display on well-drained soil, in gravel gardens or the edges of drives, in annual meadows, even on rough limestone or sandstone walls. They often tend to self-sow in such spots, but rarely come true for more than a few years.

Spring sowing is advisable on heavier soils, but the taller cultivars in particular may develop a less bushy habit when sown in spring. Seedlings should be thinned out when small.

For mixed container planting, direct sowing is impractical, as they tend to be overcrowded by their neighbours. Sow a few seeds in a 7cm (3in) pot, thin to three seedlings, and plant into the container when a good-looking mound of foliage has developed.

California poppies love sun and tend to close their flowers in shade or on dull days, so always give them plenty of light; in containers, their companions may need to be lightly trimmed. They are, however, drought-tolerant once established, especially if sown in autumn.

Not only in yellow

Breeders have brought the sleek, satiny sheen of the wild plants to semi-double flowers and selections with rippled petals, covering the full colour spectrum except for green and blue. Blue-grey foliage is an especially welcome addition. Most new cultivars are compact, 23–30cm (9–12in), and their increased branching leads to longer flowering.

The Thai Silk Series has mainly semi-double flowers with up to 13 fluted petals. Combining a dwarf, bushy habit (20–25cm/8–10in) with bluish green or greyish foliage, many are bicouours, such as 'Apricot Chiffon' (usually sold as 'Apricot Flambeau' **4**), 'Strawberry

CALIFORNIA DREAMING

Boxed numbers refer to the following cultivars of *Eschscholzia californica* (California poppy) grown in Thompson & Morgan's trials, 2009:

- 1** 'Champagne and Roses': a mix of 'Pink Champagne' and 'Rose Chiffon' (both Thai Silk Series); shades of rose to blush, fluted petals; grey-green leaves
- 2** 'Monarch Mixed': wide range of shining colours; flat, single and semi-double flowers
- 3** 'Sun Shades': rounded, orange and yellow flowers; a mix of *E. californica* and *E. californica* 'Golden West'
- 4** 'Apricot Chiffon' (syn. 'Apricot Flambeau') (Thai Silk Series): yellow petals, backed red; blue-green foliage
- 5** 'Copper Pot' (not yet available to home gardeners): reddish-orange flowers; green foliage
- 6** 'Appleblossom Chiffon' (Thai Silk Series): pale yellow, blushed and streaked in purplish pink; blue-grey foliage
- 7** 'Mission Bells': large, semi-double, fluted flowers in a wide range of colours
- 8** 'Fruit Crush' (Bush Series Formula Mixture): fluted flowers in four colours; some with bluish foliage
- 9** 'Strawberry Fields' (Thai Silk Series): semi-double, rippled flowers, red petals yellow at base; grey-green leaves

Fields' **9**, 'Appleblossom Chiffon' **6** and the mixture 'Champagne and Roses' **1**.

Mixes are useful for an informal look. Single-flowered, fluted 'Fruit Crush' **8** (20cm/8in) has just four colours (pink, orange-scarlet, butter yellow and carmine), some with grey-blue leaves. Slightly taller, semi-double 'Mission Bells' **7** has fluted flowers and a wider palette of colours. 'Monarch Mixed' **2** also has a wide range of scintillating, flat, single and semi-double blooms.

One recent introduction to look out for, with a distinctive growth habit, is *E. californica* var. *maritima* 'Golden Tears'. Having vivid yellow flowers over bluish leaves, it reaches only 15–23cm (6–9in) high, but spreads to about 60cm (2ft).

All have the great advantage of taking dry conditions once established – and in these days of water meters, creating a dazzling display so easily, without using a lot of extra water, is an attractive idea. And whether sunny or subtle, their clear, sparkling colours will always appeal. ■

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DRY GARDEN

Billowing drifts of *Eschscholzia* revel in the sun and low rainfall conditions at RHS Garden Hyde Hall (left)

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