

Weeping flowers; a nod to the pendulous flowered California buckeye

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California buckeye, *Aesculus californica*, is a much loved native tree. I tried to convey my affection for this versatile deciduous small tree in a recent article in Pacific Horticulture magazine (Vol. 70, #1, Jan - Mar 2009) which was illustrated with Phil Van Soelen's excellent photos.

Each May and June as I drive around the North Bay counties, I revel in the gorgeous floral display found along nearly any road and even within many towns and cities. Since my brain always focuses on variation in the wild, I've become intrigued by the various ways the long flower trusses are produced, their size, length, width, color and angle of display.

Most commonly the flower clusters are up and outward-facing, giving an exuberant, almost celebratory character to the round-headed trees or shrubs. Some trees have a range of angles, usually the upper flowers being erect, the side branches being horizontal and the lower branches angled downward, creating a radial look.

A small number of trees have predominantly nodding or pendant flower spikes. This character seems especially well expressed in the Napa Valley and the picturesque town of St. Helena seems to be the epicenter of this rather rare trait. These floral waterfalls are - in my opinion, stunningly beautiful, and it is odd that so little is ever mentioned concerning them.

Here is one just south of town (St. Helena) on Charter Oak Dr. growing along the margins of a small creek.

Not far away, this tree graces the picnic grounds of Taylor's Refresher, a popular local drive-in eatery.

Just west of town, this beauty is on Spring Mt. Rd. just before it heads into the hills, making a wonderful statement at a road junction.

This is the above tree (closer) showing the densely packed flower spikes - a lovely swoop of fat fragrant flowers.

Unfortunately, California buckeye does not root easily, so clonal propagation of these forms is restricted to grafting. I've tried collecting seed from some of my favorite plants, but the character is probably recessive, as the only ones to flower so far (after 5 years) are erect flowering.

Just N of town on Rt. 29 this festive tree always brings a smile to my face, such prolific beauty for free and without work.









If there were a contest for most pendant, this tree above the bus stop on the main street in town near Pine Street would certainly win. Although it tries to grace the bus shelter, the clutter of the street sadly detracts from its beauty - in a park it would be a feature plant. Closeup of the nearly vertically descending trusses -much like a wisteria - of the bus stop beauty.

As the buckeye might say, "There's not just one way to flower; just do it beautifully!"

