NOTES ON RHAMNUS CALIFORNICA

James Roof, Regional Parks Botanic Garden

In the Regional Parks Botanic Garden we grow several shrubs of *Rhamnus californica* which are evergreen and densely bushy, and from six to eight feet tall and half again as wide. These plants originated near the headwaters of the Nacimiento River in the Santa Lucia Range of Monterey County. They were planted in the Tilden Park botanic garden, which has its own native form of *R. californica*. Undoubtedly hybridization has taken place in this particular species in the botanic garden over the past twenty-five years. What are the possibilities of variation in the species and what should we look for when we engage in the culture of *R. californica*?

One certainty is a wide variation in the species. *Rhamnus californica*, horticulturally speaking, can hardly be considered a clear-cut entity. It is possibly at its best in California's Coast Ranges from Sonoma County southward to Monterey County. If we look further afield for it we can usually count on finding it hybridized with some other species of *Rhamnus*. In the Sierra foothills a great deal of *R. californica* seems to be hybridized with its subspecies *tomentella*, and many intergrades, scarcely suitable for horticultural purposes, are thereby produced.

In its northern extensions *Rhamnus californica* is rendered somewhat unsuitable as a California evergreen
because of its tendency to hybridize freely with the southern extensions of *R. purshiana*, a deciduous tree species of the Pacific Northwest. *R. purshiana* in its relatively pure form extends southward from British Columbia, Washington and Oregon into Del Norte and northern Humboldt counties. South of there *R. purshiana* is less tree-like, becoming a shorter and shorter species that shows a widespread genetic intermixture with *R. californica*. All stages of hybridization can be observed in various sectors of this tension zone — low deciduous forms of *R. purshiana*, low evergreen forms of *R. californica* with large evergreen leaves, their characters obviously derived from *R. purshiana* — all of these forms may be observed, especially along the roadsides of coastal Mendocino and Humboldt Counties.

In many places in California, *Rhamnus californica* exhibits a tendency to go deciduous in winter, losing most of its leaves, holding only tip leaves and presenting, to the horticulturist, a branchy, twiggy structure. Obviously, it is best to avoid this particular form of this species which demonstrates its nor-
them affinities and its relationship to *R. purshiana* (even though far removed from that tree species) by being semi-deciduous.

Some of the best forms of *Rhamnus californica* are those which have been beaten down by the wind on the sea coast. Here again a truly evergreen form should be selected. It is rather more common for sea bluff plants of *R. californica* to be semi-deciduous in winter than it is for them to be entirely evergreen. One of the best of the low evergreen forms of *R. californica*, scarcely ascending to more than two feet in height and spreading to eight or ten feet, is a form from the margin of Lake Merced, in San Francisco County. Not far from this Lake Merced form, on San Bruno Mountain, are many quite prostrate individuals of the species, growing as low to the ground as coast coffee-berry can possibly grow, but with the unfortunate character of being almost deciduous.

One of the nicer variants observed in *Rhamnus californica* is a small evergreen shrub, the best of which has leaves of a deciduous bluish cast. This form is found in the rare red rhyolite soil of Rincon Ridge northwest of Santa Rosa, and especially in a very small area in the yard of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Sones.

One of the most neglected fields in native California horticulture is the almost complete lack of specimens in botanic gardens and elsewhere of the very large leaved forms of *Rhamnus californica*. From my observations I would say that this scarcity would appear to spring from a notable lack of fruiting in these large leaved forms of the species. If they could be cultivated, and certain selected cultivars named, they would present perhaps the finest of all *Rhamnus* in this particular low evergreen shrub category.

It may be that the extreme variations in *Rhamnus californica* are a hangover from a previous wet age when *R. purshiana* extended much farther to the south than it does at the present time. If the *R. purshiana* has retreated to the north it has certainly left many traces of its passing in the *R. californica* that we know today. The various forms apparently produced by the interaction of these two species upon each other has left a fascinating field of native plant horticulture that remains relatively unexplored.
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