



# CALL of the NATIVES

Gathering Wildflower Seeds in the Mountains  
and Deserts, Ed Peterson Preserves  
Southern California's Plant Heritage

BY NANCY SPILLER

**T**HIS OCTOBER MORNING IS near the end of the seed-collecting season in what has been a very dry year, Ed Peterson warns in his high, sprightly voice. The 82-year-old retired gardener for the Los Angeles City School System doesn't want anyone's hopes raised too much as to what might be found. "Some things didn't even bloom this year," Peterson says. "Others didn't set." He'll be happy if he can add to his collection of penstemon—a low, trailing bush with small, bright, trumpet-like flowers. "I'd like to pick up some rabbit brush, too," he says, his pale blue eyes optimistically scanning the horizon from beneath the brim of a squashed porkpie hat. Wild buckwheat, its countless varieties known to Peterson, tints the San Gabriels rust red as he and I head up the Angeles Crest Highway. The mountains are hidden in the late-fall smog as we leave Sun Valley by way of the Tujunga Wash, but the higher we get and the further from civilization, the cleaner the air becomes, and the sky returns to its original blue.

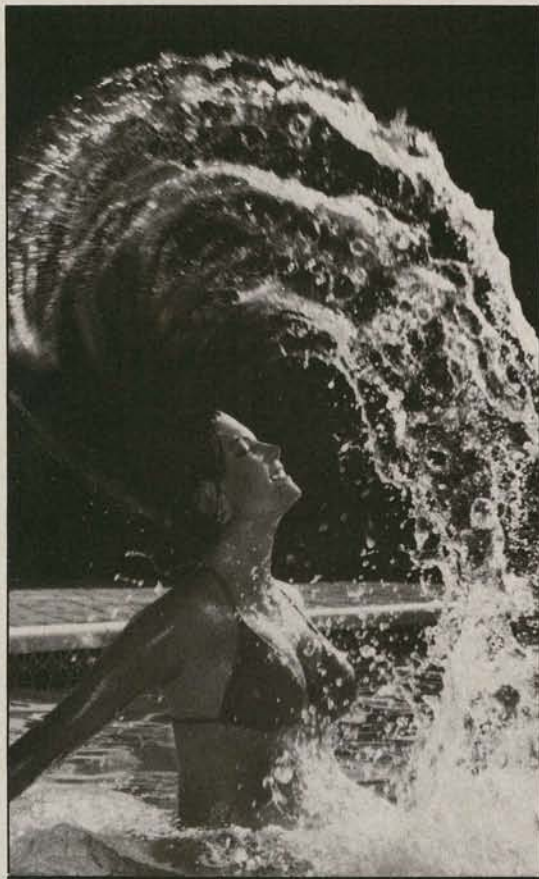
Ed Peterson is an anomaly of the Southern California landscape. In the summer and fall, he regularly ventures into what remains of the surrounding woods and fields to collect the most basic of nature's creations—seed. From the chicken-egg-size seed of the California buckeye tree to the microscopic seeds of the monkey flower, he methodically

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*Ed Peterson, opposite, relaxes in a field of native flowers while on a seed-gathering expedition for the Theodore Payne Foundation.*

*Nancy Spiller is a Los Angeles-based writer.*

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**NATIVES**

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gathers, cleans and prepares hundreds of species for distribution through the Theodore Payne Foundation for Native Wildflowers and Plants in Sun Valley. For the past 25 years, the foundation has been his excuse for wandering in the outdoors.

While four-wheel-drive vehicles and low, sporty cars zip by at a hectic pace, our van travels at trolling speed, as if we were fishing. "It's better than fishing," Peterson says. "We always come back with something."

He knows the road well, able to predict which plants will be growing at what bend, construction site, telephone pole or mile marker. He knows the life cycles of the plants just as intimately and can identify them not only when they're lush with bloom but also when they're withered with age and gone to seed.

While taking a moment to admire the Big Tujunga Dam, Peterson catches from the corner of his eye a healthy redbud planted at the edge of the parking turnout. "We wouldn't be above taking some of that," he says in his gentlemanly fashion as he reaches into the back of the van for a brown paper bag. A few crunchy handfuls of the pods are gathered, and the bag is marked "redbud—Tujunga dam."

In the course of a year Peterson estimates that he collects no more than 20 pounds of seed, the bulk of that weight being acorns and walnuts. The foundation will sell about 200 pounds worth, but most of that comes from commercial sources. What Peterson collects are the esoteric items, of more interest to botanical gardens, government agencies and scientific institutions than to home gardeners. He's shipped California native seed as far as Israel and Bangladesh.

Peterson, who has a degree in botany from UCLA, class of '30, became involved with the Payne Foundation as it was getting off the ground in the late '50s. "Mr. Payne," as Peterson always refers to him, was a nurseryman who came to Southern California from England at the turn of the century to collect plants to take back home. California natives were all the rage in England and today continue to be more popular in British gardens than they are here.

Payne noticed even then that development and the landscaping notions brought by Midwesterners to the area were eliminating the natives. Payne made California his home and, as a nurseryman in Los Angeles, attempted to cultivate an appreciation of local flora among the populace.

"It was difficult to make a living selling natives back then," Peterson says. "Now, we're fortunate; there's a growing interest in drought-tolerant plants, and we do a good little business."

We stop along the roadside to investigate a stand of rabbit brush, alive with bees. It's too early for seeds, though, and attention is drawn away from it by plump bushes of Spanish broom, filled with fragrant, orchid-like blooms. Peterson shuns it.

"Those aren't natives, they're a nuisance," he says. "A lot of non-natives were planted along the highways because they're colorful. Even the forest service planted them. They do tend to replace the natives. People think there should just be natives. After all, that's what gives you the local flavor."

The prime lesson he's learned from his years gathering is that seeds must be opportunists to survive. "They grow where the conditions are right," Peterson says. "In the process of evolution, they've come to take advantage of certain conditions. On deserts, they have wings. They'll blow or be rolled by the wind until they stop beneath a bush or in a hollow. That's where it's damp the longest in the desert and where they've got the best chance of survival.

"In nature," he adds, "there's tremendous competition. Of the thousands of seeds created, maybe one, maybe none, will produce a plant. The competition is fierce, but we don't notice because all we see is the plants that succeed."

Even forest fires can provide a window of opportunity for certain plants to multiply and conquer. There are flowers he refers to as "fire followers," because they only appear after a fire, like the bush poppies that two or three years after a fire can turn a charcoaled hillside yellow with blooms. "The fire destroys the inhibitors that certain plants cast out to prevent others from germinating," Peterson says. "It also

cracks the hard shells of other seeds so that moisture can get in. I look forward to going to a fire area in the spring; it may be covered in Mariposa lilies."

At the 55-mile post, there's a small dell lined with pine and cedar trees. The crescent-shaped expanse of sandy ground between the road and the steep slopes is covered in a lacy veil of buckwheat that looks like sienna clouds of baby's breath. Peterson steps around

this, his lean frame bent slightly with age, moving as gently as a milkweed seed carried aloft by the wind. Three weeks ago he spotted a patch of *Penstemon bridgesii* here, but the seed pods were still green. This day they are ripe for the taking. Just a few feet away are California fuchsia, another nearly microscopic seed. "We don't sell this by the pound," he says with a grin, his big hands, with their broad, flat

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thumbs, gently pulling on the stalk of the plant to free up its bounty. "When we do have enough to sell, we sell it by the apothecary spoonful. You could start as an infant and die a centenarian, and you couldn't gather 20 pounds of California fuchsia seed in your lifetime."

Back at the foundation, Peterson will add today's catch to the supply stored in the drawers, boxes and jars of the seed room. Some of the stock on hand is decades old but still capable of producing life. They have gotten blooms from 50-year-old lupine seeds gathered by Theodore Payne, and Peterson likes to tell the story of the lupine seed that germinated after 10,000 years in a glacier. "Lupines will keep almost indefinitely," he says.

Commercial seeds won't last nearly as long. "They're hybrids, and they've had the durability bred out of them."

Peterson himself is a native to the region, having been born on 28th Street in Los Angeles and then having moved to Hollywood in 1908 at the age of 3. He lived in his parents' house until 1975, apparently a confirmed bachelor ("I wanted to keep my options open"), when he married a member of his senior church group. He now lives with his wife, Gladys, a retired kindergarten teacher, in her Culver City home. There is a substantial amount of adapting to do when one marries after 70 years of singlehood, he admits. "You do get set in your ways. But Gladys says she gave up more than me. I gave up going to the foundation two to three times a week. I just go once a week now."

After a stop at one of the campgrounds for lunch, a sandwich and a thermos of milk he packed himself that morning, it's time to head back to the smog-enshrouded valley. "We got the *bridgesii*," he says. "That's what we set out to get. So it's been a successful day, I guess."

On the way down the mountain, he's asked who will take over when he has to retire from the harvest. "I just don't know," he says. "I've been looking for someone a long time. It takes patience. Knowledge. And it can be tedious. Everything has to be cleaned and sorted," he says with a circumspect shrug. "I don't know who else might want to do it." His wide, thin mouth breaks into a grin. "Therefore, I have to wish myself a long life." □