
THIRD READING

Bill No: AB 581
Author: Bennett (D)
Amended: 3/19/25 in Assembly
Vote: 21

SENATE GOVERNMENTAL ORG. COMMITTEE: 13-0, 6/10/25
AYES: Padilla, Valladares, Ashby, Blakespear, Cervantes, Dahle, Hurtado, Jones,
Ochoa Bogh, Richardson, Rubio, Smallwood-Cuevas, Wahab
NO VOTE RECORDED: Archuleta, Weber Pierson

ASSEMBLY FLOOR: 61-0, 3/28/25 (Consent) - See last page for vote

SUBJECT: State shrub

SOURCE: California Chaparral Institute
Los Padres ForestWatch

DIGEST: This bill establishes the bigberry manzanita (*Arctostaphylos glauca*) as the official state shrub.

ANALYSIS:

Existing law establishes various official state emblems, including, but not limited to: the golden poppy as the official State Flower; the California redwood as the official state tree; lace lichen as the official state lichen; the California Grizzly Bear as the state animal; Purple needlegrass, or *Nassella pulchra*, as the official state grass; and the California Golden Chanterelle as the official state mushroom.

This bill establishes the bigberry manzanita (*Arctostaphylos glauca*) as the official state shrub and makes related findings and declarations, as specified.

Background

Author Statement. According to the author's office, "AB 581 will designate the bigberry manzanita as the official shrub of California. With invasive plant species

contributing to the intensity and rapid spread of recent wildfires, it is critical for us to highlight the key benefits of native California plants. Due to millions of years of adaptation to the California climate and landscape, the bigberry manzanita possess unique abilities to efficiently utilize water, help with soil erosion and regenerate at higher rates after fire exposure. This species does not natively grow in any state outside of California, aside from a region in Baja California, making it uniquely representative of California.”

Shrubbery and the Chaparral. A shrub is a woody plant that is smaller than a tree and typically has multiple stems arising near the ground rather than a single trunk. Shrubs vary widely in size, shape, and function, but are often uniquely identified by their height – generally under 20 feet tall – and their dense branching structure. Unlike herbaceous plants, shrubs are perennial and retain their woody structure year-round. They play a vital role in ecosystems by providing habitat, stabilizing soil, and supporting pollinators and wildlife. While appearing to be a humble background flora, shrubs sprang to unlikely pop culture fame due to *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, when Roger the Shrubber and the shrub-obsessed Knights Who Say “Ni!” turned the unassuming landscaping staple into high comedy.

Chaparral is one of California’s most distinctive and widespread ecosystems. Found primarily in coastal and inland foothill regions with hot, dry summers and mild, wet winters, chaparral is dominated by drought-tolerant shrubs such as manzanita, chamise, and ceanothus. Many chaparral plants, such as the bigberry manzanita, have developed traits like fire-triggered seed germination or thick bark to survive and regenerate after periodic wildfires.

Bigberry Manzanita (Arctostaphylos glauca) – a Shrubbery that looks Nice. And Not Too Expensive. Supporters of the bigberry manzanita point out that it is a quintessential symbol of California’s diverse and resilient natural heritage. This evergreen shrub, native to the chaparral and coastal sage scrub habitats of California and Baja California, is characterized by its dense, branching growth habit. The bigberry’s branches further stand out in the chaparral with a smooth roan-like coat of red bark as if dusted with ash or burnished by the wind. The bigberry flaunts oval-shaped leaves with a distinctive blue-grey hue, giving it its species epithet “glauca” from the Latin for “bluish-gray” or “gray-green,” and is often associated with a waxy coating on leaves or other surfaces.

Bigberry manzanitas produce small, urn-shaped flowers ranging in color from white to pale pink, followed by edible berries that are a food source for birds and mammals. The plant’s extensive root system aids in soil stabilization, making it

valuable for rehabilitating disturbed watersheds and wildfire burn scars. Adapted to California's Mediterranean climate, it thrives in dry, nutrient-poor soils and has a unique relationship with fire: while it does not resprout after burning, its seeds require the heat and chemicals from fire to germinate, ensuring its regeneration in fire-prone ecosystems. However, because it takes at least 30 years between fires before there are enough seeds in the soil bank to secure the bigberry's survival post-fire, increasing frequency of wildfire and the drying climate threaten the long term health of the species.

Beyond its ecological significance, bigberry manzanita holds cultural and historical importance. Its berries were traditionally used by Indigenous communities to make a refreshing, cider-like drink, and young branches of the shrub served in crafting tools and other structures. The plant's name reflects California's multicultural heritage: "manzanita" means "little apple" in Spanish, while "Arctostaphylos" derives from Greek, translating to "bear" and "bunch of grapes," a nod to the now-extinct California grizzly bear that once roamed its habitats.

California's Official State Emblem Landscape. California is renowned for its iconic geography, rich history, global influence, and its industrious and vibrant people. Boasting a unique array of official symbols, the state represents its natural beauty, historical significance, and cultural identity through emblems. These symbols serve as reminders for residents and visitors alike, emphasizing the state's distinct identity and the importance of preserving its heritage for future generations. As California continues to evolve and grow, its state emblems are intended to remain steadfast symbols of the state's past, present, and future.

For example, the golden poppy is codified as the official state flower, representing the state's vibrant landscapes and wildflower fields. Many people believe that emblem law prohibits cutting or damaging the California poppy because of its official designation. In fact, there is no law specifically protecting the California poppy, but the designation endears a special appreciation of the flower and has perpetuated the myth that no one may pick them. Designated in 1903, the golden poppy symbolizes the beauty of California's natural environment.

A number of the state's official emblems lean heavily on California's Gold Rush history. The official state motto – "Eureka" – is a Greek word that translates to "I have found it." In the context of California, the motto is closely tied to the California Gold Rush of 1848-1855. Gold discovered at Sutter's Mill in 1848 sparked a massive influx of fortune-seekers who flocked to California to seek wealth and prosperity. Native gold is designated as the official state mineral and

mineralogic emblem, while “The Golden State” serves as the official state nickname, and Bodie is established as the official state gold rush ghost town.

Recent additions to the list of official state emblems include the California Golden Chanterelle (state mushroom), the pallid bat (state bat), the banana slug (state slug), the shell of the black abalone (state sea shell), and the Dungeness crab (state crustacean) – all having been added during the 2023-24 Legislative Session. California is now represented by nearly 50 state symbols, 43 of which are codified by statute in Government Code including: state amphibian, animal, bat, bird, colors, dance, dinosaur, fabric, flower, flag, folk dance, fossil, gemstone, gold rush ghost town, grass, historical society, insect, LGBTQ veterans memorial, lichen, marine fish, marine mammal, marine reptile, military museum, mineral, motto, mushroom, nickname, nut, prehistoric artifact, reptile, rock, seal, silver rush ghost town, soil, song, sport, tall ship, tartan, tree, and Vietnam veterans memorial.

Pruned Before Passage. Not every emblem takes root. While some proposals enjoy basking in bipartisan sunshine, others have failed to survive the shade of a disapproving Legislature. Examples of would-be-emblems left wandering in the wilderness include AB 666 (Rogers, 2025) which would name Bigfoot as the official state cryptid. That bill failed to receive a motion in the Assembly Arts, Entertainment, Sports, & Tourism Committee earlier this year. AB 868 (E. Garcia, 2021) proposed to establish the date shake as the official state milkshake. That bill was approved by the Assembly but never heard in the Senate Governmental Organization Committee. AB 1769 (Voepel, 2018) would have established the California Vaquero Horse as the official state horse. That bill was never heard in the Assembly Governmental Organization Committee.

In 2006, Governor Schwarzenegger terminated the possibility of naming Zinfandel “California’s historic wine” contemplated by AB 1253 (Migden, 2006). As introduced, the bill sought to designate that particular varietal as an official state emblem. However, the bill was watered down after much attention and controversy – and instead proposed Zinfandel as historic. Governor Schwarzenegger vetoed the legislation writing, in part, “California wines have inspired authors, artists and Oscar-winning motion pictures. Singling one out for special recognition would be inappropriate.” That bill is yet to be back.

The importance of state emblems in California, as well as in any other state, is their ability to convey the unique identity, values, and history of the region. As such, when proposing new official state emblems, it is crucial to give careful consideration to the emblem's significance to the state and its resonance with both

current and future residents. Emblems serve as reminders of the state's heritage and represent the collective consciousness of its people. By recognizing emblems that hold deep meaning and relevance, California can effectively celebrate its past, present, and future, while inspiring residents to appreciate and preserve the state's legacy. It may be important to consider whether, after a certain point, the state's emblem collection turns from distinctive to distractingly decorative.

Branching Out Too Far? Designating a new state symbol can briefly stir a media response, but does not always materially accomplish any particular policy goal such as supporting habitat, research, or protections for the identified symbol. Each time a new symbol sparks a burst of attention, it may lead to a sort of “emblem fatigue” as successive designations produce progressively smaller spikes in public interest and can foster a growing frustration from the general public. Exceptions to the emblematic law of diminishing returns include the bald eagle (USA), giant panda (China), and Bengal tiger (India) that have seen natural populations rebound after intense, well-funded recovery campaigns and attention. Alternatively, the California Grizzly Bear – California's official state animal – went extinct in 1922 when the last known bear was reportedly shot in Tulare County.

Further, a February 1, 2024, article in *CalMatters* titled “A bill for every problem? Why California lawmakers introduce longshots,” cites a 2002 Legislative Analyst's Office estimate that “each bill cost at least \$18,000 to go from introduction to passage: Each bill is given a title and number, goes through analysis by committee staff and is printed out. An updated dollar figure from the legislative analyst was not available, but adjusting for inflation, each bill costs in the neighborhood of \$30,000.”

The article goes on to note that, “[e]ven Jerry Brown, who famously vetoed a bill with the message, ‘Not every human problem deserves a law,’ signed a majority of those sent to his desk while he was governor.”

California's Proposition 140 approved by the voters in 1990, among other things, limited the total amount of expenditures allowed by the Legislature. The Committee may wish to consider at what point establishing additional state symbols reaches a breaking point in a larger cost-benefit analysis. Alternative avenues currently exist that allow for the Legislature to recognize the myriad iconic animals, places, and things that make California a globally recognized cultural driver it is – without the need for creating new statute. Options include resolutions and certificates which are commonly adopted and/or distributed and

allow the Legislature to highlight particularly notable animals, plants, places, or items within the state.

Related/Prior Legislation

SB 765 (Niello, 2025) establishes the giant garter snake (*Thamnophis gigas*) as the official state snake. (Pending in the Assembly Water, Parks, and Wildlife Committee)

AB 666 (Rogers, 2025) would have established Bigfoot as the official state cryptid. (Held without recommendation in the Assembly Arts, Entertainment, Sports, and Tourism Committee)

AB 1334 (Wallis, 2025) establishes solar energy as the official state energy. (Pending in the Senate Governmental Organization Committee)

FISCAL EFFECT: Appropriation: No Fiscal Com.: No Local: No

SUPPORT: (Verified 6/10/25)

California Chaparral Institute (Source)

Los Padres ForestWatch (Source)

California Institute for Biodiversity

California Native Plant Society

Sea of Clouds

The Nature Conservancy

OPPOSITION: (Verified 6/10/25)

None received

ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT: In support of the bill, the California Chaparral Institute writes that, “[l]ike the California Grizzly Bear that thrived in the chaparral, Bigberry manzanita is big and bold. When undisturbed for a century or more, its smooth, burgundy trunk can become waist-sized, its graceful branches can reach more than 20 feet into the sky, and its fallen, white flowers can blanket the ground with a soft, botanical snow. Unlike the grizzly, Bigberry manzanita remains with us today as both a living symbol of the state’s natural wonders, and as a living reminder to take care of what remains of wild California.”

Further, “Bigberry manzanita has a delicate relationship to fire. When burned under the chaparral’s naturally infrequent, high-intensity fire regime, the shrub responds by seed germination. Although the adults expire, their offspring emerge

from the soil by the dozens, rising like a Phoenix, repopulating the chaparral with energetic, resilient seedlings.”

Additionally, the Los Padres ForestWatch writes that, “[b]ig berry manzanita is found exclusively in the California Floristic Province, growing across chaparral-covered foothills and mountains from California’s southern border to the Bay Area. While many Californians are familiar with manzanitas generally thanks to their iconic appearance, most are likely unfamiliar with big berry manzanita specifically despite the fact that it is one of the largest and most striking manzanita species in existence. Its smooth red bark, lightly colored leaves, and large fruits make it a recognizable species, and designating it as California’s official state shrub would bring heightened awareness to big berry manzanita as well as manzanitas and chaparral in general. It is crucial we take appropriate steps to ensure we recognize this plant’s symbolism in California’s most extensive shrubland ecosystem.”

Further, “big berry manzanita can also serve as a bellwether for consequential changes to natural fire patterns in chaparral-dominated portions of the state. The increasing frequency of fire in many areas and the subsequent spread of invasive species can threaten big berry manzanita. It is important now more than ever to educate the public about the importance of chaparral and the species found in this ecosystem, including the big berry manzanita, to increase awareness about the dangers of climate change and increased fire activity from human activities.”

ASSEMBLY FLOOR: 61-0, 3/28/25

AYES: Addis, Aguiar-Curry, Ahrens, Alanis, Arambula, Ávila Farías, Bains, Bauer-Kahan, Bennett, Berman, Bonta, Bryan, Calderon, Caloza, Castillo, Connolly, Davies, Dixon, Elhawary, Ellis, Flora, Fong, Garcia, Gipson, Mark González, Hadwick, Haney, Harabedian, Hart, Hoover, Irwin, Jackson, Kalra, Krell, Lackey, Lee, Lowenthal, Macedo, McKinnor, Muratsuchi, Nguyen, Ortega, Pacheco, Patterson, Pellerin, Ramos, Ransom, Celeste Rodriguez, Michelle Rodriguez, Blanca Rubio, Sanchez, Schultz, Solache, Stefani, Ta, Tangipa, Valencia, Wallis, Wicks, Wilson, Rivas

NO VOTE RECORDED: Alvarez, Boerner, Carrillo, Chen, DeMaio, Essayli, Gabriel, Gallagher, Jeff Gonzalez, Papan, Patel, Petrie-Norris, Quirk-Silva, Rogers, Schiavo, Sharp-Collins, Soria, Ward, Zbur

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