

Grevillea robusta—The Silk Oak

Grevillea robusta, the Silk Oak is of unusual botanical interest. It is not an oak and not even closely related to oaks. Instead, it belongs to a family known as the Proteaceae which consists of 1500 evergreen trees and shrubs that are restricted to the Southern Hemisphere, particularly, Australia and South Africa. Most of the other 350 species of *Grevillea* are small to medium shrubs and are spectacular additions to water-wise gardens. Many genera in the Proteaceae are also used in the international cut flower industry, such as *Protea*, *Bankisia*, *Leucodendron* and *Leucospermum*, for their exotic appearance and longevity in arrangements. Members of this family have distinctly characteristic flowers that are usually aggregated in dense spikes or heads. Each individual flower consists of a central ovary with a long, stiff style and bulbous stigma. The stamens are completely fused to the single, surrounding “petal” layer, which I will call the perianth. The pollen-bearing portions of the stamens are located in pocket-like depressions at the tips of the perianth. As the flower develops, the perianth splits longitudinally along one seam and curls back pulling the stigma with it until it “pops” free and the flower opens completely.

In the spring, *Grevillea robusta* produces showy spikes of bright yellow and orange flowers like those described above. The flower spikes occur at the tips of leafy shoots and because each flower bends upwards, these spikes look

like golden “hairbrushes.” The general shape of these trees and their leaves are also distinctive. The evergreen leaves are deeply lobed and dissected with silvery undersurfaces. Individual trees grow rapidly upward and are pyramidal in youth. Their main trunks divide with maturity to form 50-100 ft tall trees of variable shapes. This species has been imported from Australia into California for over a century as street trees and landscape ornamentals. It grows in poor, compact soils and in full sun with little irrigation. It thrives in heat and produces shade quickly. Because of its negative features, i.e. sporadic leaf fall, brittle wood that breaks in wind storms and intrusive roots, it works best in open parks and playgrounds, rural streets and the backs of yards. There are two dense plantings of Silk Oaks on Victoria Avenue: on the outbound side near Anna and Horace and on the inbound side between Monroe and Jefferson.

