

The Fragrant News

Summer 2009

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This season the good rain has been welcome while the winds still continue into January.

The garden is always dependant on what weather it sits under as to whether there will be a good harvest. The different climate zones of New Zealand mean a range of variety in wind and rain volume. Getting to know the local conditions gives an understanding of which herbs will be content, happy and thrive. For instance bergamot tends to die quickly of grey mould in Auckland but reaches 2m in Invercargill. And lavender farms are mostly in Hawkes Bay and Canterbury as they have less rain on the East Coast than areas on the west side of the islands. Take time out this summer and familiarize yourself with how your garden does well. Writing observations in a diary can lead to a collation of useful data for planning in the future. If one variety of herb or vegetable fails to flourish make a note that can be referred to so a different type can be tried the next season. My old Grandmother loved her quotes and one of them comes to mind – “If it’s worth doing then do it well.”

RED IN THE GARDEN

So far this summer there has been plenty of rain that continues to water the gardens. As it is occurring at least once a week the landscape is lush and green. On the colour spectrum opposites attract and the opposite of lush green is bright red. Take a look around the garden and see just how much red there is blooming. Red is such a versatile colour and it ranges from orangey tones of red, pinky reds through to reds that are almost purple. Fuchsias are in full bloom and



as they prefer dark corners and shade their red, pink and purple flowers jump out from the dark green foliage. One, Fuchsia “Gartenmeister” has long pendulous orange-red flowers and purplish tone to the leaves. This is more cold- hardy than many of the hybrid types and will over- winter in our colder climate especially if it has some protection from heavy frosts. Placing it under existing trees is best to ensure shade in summer and cover for winter.

Another flower that is a very striking orange-red is Maltese Cross. This variety of campion has flowers that are shaped like the cross of Malta’s national flag. All campions like hot and dry summer weather so on top of a rockery that is free draining is best. The flowers are 50 cm high and at the end of the season the stalk can be cut back to the ground hugging foliage.

Another sun lover that flowers red is artoctis. The flower colours range from orange through red to purple the artoctis is an ideal plant for that very hot spot

that gets parched as summer warms up. *Artoctis* has broad, indented, grey and furry leaves. All indicative of a plant that can tolerate the heat and dry conditions. Grown en masse on a bank *artoctis* will rapidly grow along and colonize an area of over one metre round. It covers the ground getting no taller than 15cm. The daisy-shaped flowers will keep budding up all summer long if the prudent gardener remembers to take off the spent flowers once a week. This encourages the plant to keep growing new buds.

Many roses are red. Through summer the climbers and ramblers will make magnificent displays. Often a rose can be found on farmland especially along a roadside fence. These roses were probably planted long ago by a pioneer settler who needed the gladness of red roses among the greenery of the native bush. Look for the remains of an early cottage nearby. Rose petals can be added to salads, fruit salads, cool drinks and put in the teapot to add colour and flavour to the meal.



Another red flowering herb that is used in the same way as red rose petals is bergamot. The fresh flowers can be pulled apart and the petals sprinkled over the salad bowl just before serving. The startlingly handsome flowerhead has a pleasant aroma. It is full of nectar and adored by the bees. Getting to a metre high at least the mass of red blooms can be cut back to the base once flowering is finished. Or cut the flowers when in full bloom and add to the teapot along with black tea leaves. This is the traditional way to make 'Earl Grey' tea.

Some of the vast dahlia family begin flowering in the New Year. Before they were cultivated and bred for shows the species varieties were often red or



orange-red flowering. The tubers of some ancient types were used as a root crop by the Indian tribe of South America.

"Red Velvet" Yarrow starts blooming in January. The flower colour is RED! Looking closely at the petals in sunlight they have beautiful velvet lustre. Yarrows are border plants that are true perennials. This means they are low over winter in the cold and in spring send up shoots that are the flowering stalks. In autumn these spent flowerheads need to be trimmed back to the base. Remember to give the flower garden a fertilizer boost before Easter. This nutrient will be absorbed by the herbs and plants to ensure they stay healthy

over the coming winter months. A small price to pay for the splendid red display that is being enjoyed this summer.

FLOWERS IN THE GARDEN

The summer garden is full of colour and vigour with many splashes of flowers enhancing the scene. There is a wide choice of trees, shrubs and perennials that help the garden look great with their late spring and early summer flowering. While fashion trends in the garden come and go there are many, little known flowers that keep on being good performers. Their uniqueness being an attractive advantage because they are so unusual and different. Take the Tulip tree – *Liriodendron tulipifera*. It flowers in the garden in late November and is one of the most striking large



trees imaginable. The tree needs plenty of space and will grow to 10 metres high within fifteen years. Eventually it makes an ideal shade tree for an area as the tree spreads eight metres round. Not a tree for a small backyard but an attractive advantage to a country garden. The pointed leaves are almost tulip shaped on their own but it is the flower that gives the tree its name, not its leaf shape. Sitting in a mass, all over the foliage these upturned, tulip-like flowers make their appearance. They are green on the tips of the petals which graduate down to a bold orange zigzag stripe. Below this bold line the flower colour turns yellow to the base of the calyx where it joins onto the branch. How such a flower ever came to be so shaped and coloured is amazing.

The Salvia family group has seven to eight hundred members and many of these flowers come in spectacular shape and colour. African Sage (*Salvia africana lutea*) is making a bold brown show. Yes, the flowers are a definite shade of brown. They flower for about two months atop the pale green, rounded leaves. The whole bush gets over a metre high. It prefers sun and heat to flourish so suits rockeries or coastal spots. It is slightly frost tender so will not suit higher inland gardens.

One plant that flourishes anywhere is spiderwort (*Tradescantia*). It has spiky, green leaves and grows in a clump with grass-like foliage. But the flowers all have just three petals. These flatten out and are very angular. The flowers of the different types come in shades of white, blue, purple and cerise and are bold shades, not pastel. The clump of spiderwort is startling and eye catching in November with the mass display of the many angular flowers. Spiderwort got its country name from the belief that it could be used to cure spider bites. This has been proven to be untrue but the anthers of spiderwort have been used to detect



radiation. If there is a radiation leak the anthers turn from yellow to pink. Another unusual flower in the garden is salsify (*Tragopogon porriflorius*). This is a biennial and in the first year stays as a low spiky clump of leaf blades. The second spring there is a great burst of growth as the plant gets over one metre tall. Thin, pointed flower buds appear and out of each one cascades a daisy shaped flower that is dusky purple. The plant goes on producing many flowers for a

month before the seed heads form. These are very sculptural, rounded, the size of a tennis ball with each long seed attached to its own parachute, fluffed up end. Left to self-seed the salsify will populate an area and provide a startling display all over again the next year or two. Salsify is regarded as a gourmet vegetable. It is also known as the oyster plant because of the flavour of its carrot-like root. These are but a few of the amazing flowering plants that nature has conjured up for us to enjoy and appreciate the magic.

HURRAH! SOME COMMONSENSE AT LONG LAST!

I am constantly upset at the good, beneficial herbs that continue to be listed as “pest plants” and are either BANNED from the garden or they get exceedingly bad press from uninformed journalists.

Herbs like comfrey and St John’s Wort are two examples. Comfrey is considered carcinogenic because of ONE test where rats were fed excessive amounts of comfrey. Surprise! They developed liver cancer. Further tests have since reversed this test. Proving that comfrey, in moderate amounts, is healthy and supports liver function. But still the authorities stick to their verdict and comfrey remains ‘suspect’.

St John's Wort in laboratory tests was found to cause photosensitivity in pale skin animals when ingested. So what happens? Horror! Horror! Sheep are pale skinned. Let's ban the "pest plant" from NZ pastures otherwise there are going to be lots of sheep with bad sunburn!

Recently two researches, unfortunately overseas, are using NZ and its ecosystem for new studies. Studies that explain that NZ is a great example of how native plant extinction is NOT caused by non-native plants. They have statistics – NZ has 2065 native (indigenous) plants. These grow alongside 22,000 non-native plants. So far, three native plants are documented as becoming extinct. And meanwhile, 2069 non-native (exotic) plants have naturalized here. The two studies say that while it is cited that biological invasion are among the top two or three causes of native extinctions this overview is too simplistic. NZ authorities have to change their attitudes!

Elder is another herb that is now banned by some regional councils. It is on the list of 'suspect- possibly-could-be –invasive' trees. This is a herb I have grown for over 20 years. None of the original trees remain on our 5 acres. They all succumbed to the lemonwood tree borer. (These native insects ate my elders up!) Yes the birds (including the 5 resident tuis) do beat me to most of the berries and spread new elder bushes round the place. Those seeds that fall in the shade or under-canopy – DO NOT SURVIVE. They dislike shady areas and they suffer if surrounded by more dominant trees. So, how are these elders going to survive on top of the ranges in among all our native forests if they are so fussy in a sheltered domestic garden? But, it is the same old story that has been going on for centuries – who is going to listen to an old 'witch'? (Isn't the meaning of that word a corruption of 'wise woman?')

Hey! Have a good summer and when in a native reserve or national park sit down, on the edge of the path, and look at all those exotic plants – see any potentially invasive ones? Or just a heap of plantain, clover, couch grass, puha, trefoil..... ALL GOOD HERBS.

THANKS FOR THE FEEDBACK!

What bigger compliment to get than a request for Myrtle's Marmalade recipe last month. A recipient emailed to say it was the best flavoured marmalade she had ever made and tasted. Inadvertently losing the recipe initiated the request. We are also getting great positive comments from those of the newsletter readers who know that Marilyn is now writing a regular herb article for the national gardening magazine "Weekend Gardener". Each fortnightly article also includes recipes and cooking tips.

Herbally yours,
Marilyn and Ian Wightman
New Zealand
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