

Fuchsias Love Santa Cruz Climate

Beginners And Experts Have Top Results

By Ron Reeves

One of the easiest shrubs to grow in the Santa Cruz area is the spectacular and varied fuchsia, which gives pride to a beginner but has characteristics making it a specialty plant favorite for intense gardeners.

Santa Cruz has the warm days, high humidity and fog which bring out the best in fuchsias. Fuchsia problems for those living in hot, dry climates are virtually eliminated. Also, the generally mild Santa Cruz winters let most fuchsias come through with little frost damage, although specialists take care to protect plants which are particularly valued.

The plants have many uses in the garden, from being pinched low for a planter box, to the spectacular hanging baskets and tall-growing small-tree forms which can be grown in very few parts of the nation.

Typical of the many area people who have found fuchsias to be a great hobby plant are Mr. and Mrs. Robert Rennilson who live at 3050 Brown's lane, Soquel. The Rennilson residence is surrounded by garden areas in which a wide range of plants and trees are grown, but the fuchsia is favorite.

Rennilson, typical of many fuchsia growers, can tell you many things which should be done to fuchsias for their best development. Then he quietly tells you he ignores most of the rules and lets the shrubs more or less go on their own, something which can only be done where the plant is happy with its environment.

As it goes in gardening, Rennilson and his wife, Thelma, became interested in fuchsias when he retired from the San Francisco post office department and moved to the Soquel area in 1955. Their neighbor was Mrs. Cassie Desmond, first president of the Santa Cruz Branch of the American Fuchsia society. She gave the Rennilsons 100 fuchsia cuttings. With no prior experience, they succeeded in growing 99 of them. From then on, these plants were tops on the list.

"For anyone lacking experience in gardening fuchsias are about the easiest and most rewarding hobby in Santa Cruz county," Rennilson said. At one time they were growing 650 varieties.

To add instant color to the



Mrs. Robert Rennilson, right, president of Santa Cruz branch, American Fuchsia society, and her husband work with a developing tree fuchsia in their plant filled yard at Soquel. The Rennilsons hold that fuchsias are

one of the best hobby and general plants for the Santa Cruz area because of nearly ideal growing conditions. Fuchsias love cool nights and fog and most problems of fuchsia growing which crop up in interior

areas are eliminated. Beginners can grow good fuchsias with little trouble, and those interested in further development can produce excellent plants and bloom by putting through extra study and work.

garden which may be lacking in late summer bloom, the fuchsia is ideal. They are available at local nurseries at reasonable prices in containers, either upright varieties, or in full-bloom hanging baskets. They will continue to bloom until frost and the plants should carry through the winter for an even better show next year.

Location in the garden is important for fuchsias.

"A fuchsia should really have only morning sun," Rennilson said. If partial shade isn't available from roof overhang, fences or trees, a simple lathhouse or other shading arrangement can be worked into the garden arrangement.

Some varieties will produce in full sun, but Rennilson suggests checking with the nursery before buying varieties for this location.

"If it is necessary to grow them in the sun, stick to the darker colors," he explained. The

lighter color varieties seem to have more trouble in open areas.

The most important summer care for the plants is watering, as the soil around the shallow-rooted plants must be kept damp at all times. If the soil is well drained, it is impossible to water them too much during the growing season.

Those in the soil should have a mulch of approximately four inches of leaf mold or peat moss to help conserve moisture, and also to keep weeds at a minimum. With this, watering two or three times a week is probably adequate. During warm weather, container plants should be watered every day.

The plants also like to have the foliage sprinkled, and growers of top plants make it a point to spray the whole plants each day.

Fertilizing is also important, as the plants need plenty of nutrients to keep in top form.

Rennilson said he uses mainly manure tea for his bushes, which is made by putting steer or horse manure in a bucket of water and letting it steep for a week or so. He applies this "every couple of weeks."

Those wanting to use commercial fertilizer should use a 4-5-2 (nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium) combination in the early spring, which brings out the foliage, then switching to a low-nitrogen 0-10-10 to bring out the best blooms.

For a potting mixture, Rennilson recommends half leaf mold and half garden soil, with some coarse sand thrown in. Normal garden soil, with additions of the mulch and some manure, will usually suit the fuchsias, providing drainage is good.

Poor drainage encourages verticillium wilt, one of the few fuchsia diseases. If this happens the roots and stem bases rot, and the plant should be removed and burned.

Disease pests are few, although white fly and aphids will occasionally cause trouble, as well as mealybugs, mites and thrips. Malathion or Chlordane will halt the pests. University of California scientists recommend against DDT as it has resulted in stunting of small fuchsia plants.

Pruning and shaping are important to fuchsias, as the bloom comes on new wood. The basic pruning is quite drastic, often taking away most of the shrub which encourages new growth for the coming year. Pruning is recommended in late winter after frosts are past. Earlier pruning can spur the plant to throw out new growth which will be damaged by the frosts.

During the growing season, frequent pinching will encourage bushy new growth and also help shape the plants.

Many of the large fuchsia shrubs of Santa Cruz are not pruned except to remove branches which grow out of bounds. This results in a graceful and open shrub with fewer blooms. Hanging basket fuchsia branches should be cut back to the pot or basket edge.

Fuchsias may also be pruned to many special shapes, as the tree fuchsias which have a single trunk with laterals are pinched off leading to the development of an umbrella-shaped mass of leaves and blooms at the top. Espalier fuchsias are often trained to special shapes against a wall or fence, and pyramid or columnal fuchsias are also popular.

In Santa Cruz, winter protection of ground-planted fuchsias is by the addition of several inches of mulch, or a plastic covering. Potted fuchsias are more likely to be damaged by freezing and should be put under cover in a garage during cold spells.

The Rennilsons don't bother too much with winter protection, and last year they lost only 22 of their some 600 plants.

He warned not to throw away plants which appear dead in the spring when other fuchsias are throwing out their first growth. Often new growth appears from the roots.

Propagation of fuchsias is simple, with new plants growing readily from five-inch soft tip cuttings. They can be taken nearly any time during the growing season, but are best started in September and October, grown under glass or lath through the winter for the next season's plants.

Growing the slips is by removing the bottom leaves and placing the cuttings in coarse sand, which is kept damp. They should root within four to six weeks and be ready for soil potting.

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