

BEAUTY AND THE BUREAUCRACY



Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

For 25 years, Richard Criswell has been planning, planting and maintaining the gardens at the Santa Cruz City Hall.

A break in the drought brings the blooms back to City Hall

By **MIKE BLAESSER**
Bay Living editor

THE LAST five years have been rough on Richard Criswell. Like other gardeners, Criswell has had to contend with the drought, which has meant fewer flowers and browner lawns.

But happy days are here again. Although no one is declaring the drought dead, the rains this year brought enough water to send gardeners back to the nurseries to renew their landscapes.

For Criswell, who has cared for the gardens at Santa Cruz City Hall on Center Street for the past 25 years, that means the return of flowering annuals and potted plants.

“THIS WOULD be a solid bed of annuals,” Criswell, 49, said as he surveyed the bed that fronts Center Street. Five years ago the bed was filled with annuals. But Criswell has changed his habits to fit the times. Perennials require less water than annuals so he has planted more perennials.

Along the front is a border of annuals consisting mainly of white alyssum and yellow and lavender violas. The colors stand out against a backdrop of foxglove and penstemon, both of which bloom in tall spikes. The annual border and the foxglove and penstemon are set off by large euryops, which feature

daisylike yellow flowers.

Criswell noted the blooming season of foxglove (also called digitalis) can be extended by cutting its main spike after it flowers and letting side shoots develop. Penstemon, too, benefits from a trim after the initial bloom.

(For those interested in viewing penstemon in a mass planting, head to the Locust Street side of City Hall where a border of penstemon grows along a low wall.)

Criswell has continued the perennial-annual theme in the bed directly opposite the Center Street planting. Under a huge arbor that shows the blossoms of the potato vine (the bougainvillea that graced the spot was killed in the frost of '90) are new plantings of box leaf, Mediterranean heather and swan river daisies. The perennials will eventually fill in the area while a border of pansies provides the color.

For the first time in five years, two large planter areas in the front courtyard have been planted. Criswell has filled the areas with “madness mix” petunias. While he would like to do more, he is happy to just once again put some color in the area.

WHEN CRISWELL came to the city Parks and Recreation Department, he already had experience in basic landscape

maintenance — mowing and trimming. Under the direction of City Hall gardener Todd Gresham, Criswell learned the intricacies of gardening. Although Gresham died a year after Criswell arrived, Criswell credited his boss with teaching him a lot about gardening.

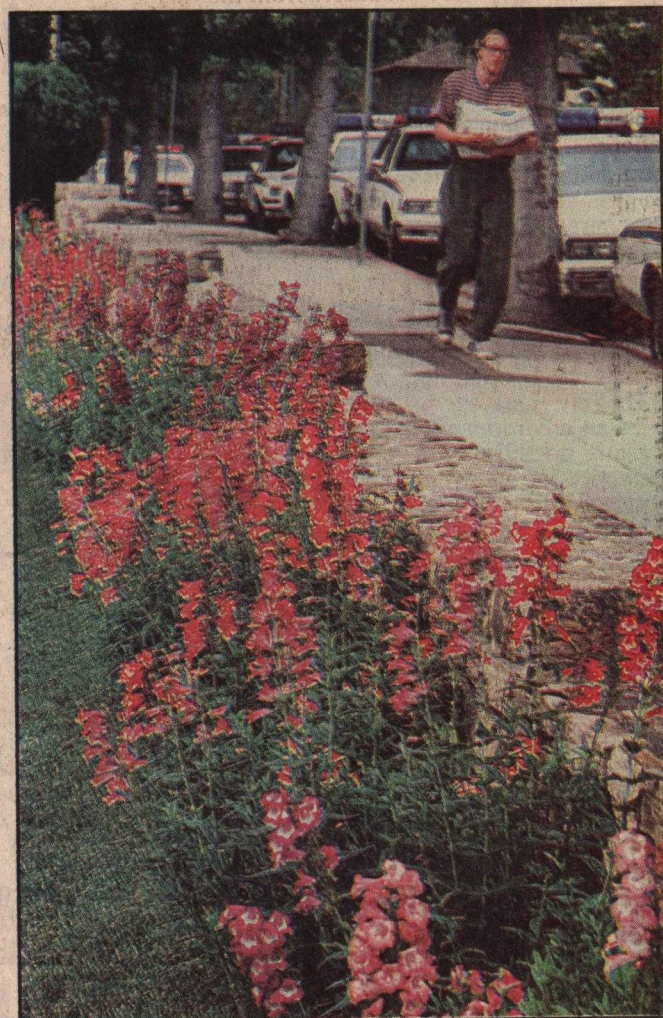
Criswell has continued to study plants, their diseases and maintenance on his own, and contends “A lot of it is common sense.” Apparently his common sense has served him well. He has received numerous city awards and one of his City Hall garden projects was featured in Sunset Magazine.

Throughout the year he thinks about plant combinations and color schemes, visiting nurseries to get more ideas. With the help of one assistant, Criswell cares for the grounds at City Hall, the library and the Civic Auditorium.

For gardeners who like to browse through books to come up with fresh ideas, the grounds of City Hall are like a glossy magazine whose pages have come to life.

Criswell is used to the compliments he gets as people tour the grounds and is pleased that people can come to City Hall and see something nice.

“Why do you come to City Hall?” he asked, then answered, saying, “To pay bills, complain. But by the time you walk through here and get to the back, maybe you’re settled down.”



Penstemon provides color along Locust Street.