

WHS Plant Notes for January 2012

Haemanthus deformis (Amaryllidaceae)

Grown by Judy Wong in Menlo Park:

Judy's spectacular, evergreen *Haemanthus* was given to her by Bill Kurtz. It has a pair of thick, broad leaves that lie flat against the ground—the ones on Judy's plant measured about 9 in. wide and 7 in. long—with its inflorescence centered in the crease between the leaves. Each leaf pair persists for more than a year with a new pair starting during or just after bloom. It blooms winter into spring with a compact umbel of many slender, white flowers cupped by broad, petal-like, white bracts. Stamens with conspicuous golden anthers protrude from the flowers. Its short flower stem is about 4 in. tall. If pollinated, clusters of dark orange berries follow. It is native to forests and rocky, shaded slopes and stream banks from southern KwaZulu-Natal Province into Eastern Cape Province in South Africa. It grows with the neck of the bulb just at ground level and forms offsets very slowly. Give it excellent drainage and year-round water in a cool, shady spot. They will even grow and bloom in heavy shade. They are said to be hardy to mid-20s F.

Magnolia doltsopa, syn. *Michelia doltsopa* (Magnoliaceae) Chinese Magnolia

Grown by Jon Craig in Corralitos:

Jon says this is about the only thing in his nursery with leaves right now. It is a good-looking, evergreen tree native to the eastern Himalayan region. Jon grows his from seeds and finds that they will start to bloom at around 5 to 7 years of age. They begin blooming in winter, just about now, with cream to white flowers emerging from furry, rust-brown buds. The flowers are very fragrant, long-lasting and showy. They're 3 to 6 in. across with 12 to 16, 1-in.-wide tepals and occur at leaf axils all along the branches. This trait of axial blooming used to separate a large number of evergreen magnolias into their own genus *Michelia*. Botanists have decided recently there's no scientific reason for this separation and moved them into *Magnolia*. Its dark green leaves are about 8 in. long, 3 in. wide and seem to drape from the branches. In nature it can grow to 90 ft tall but is more likely to reach 25 to 30 ft in gardens, growing about 1 ft a year. Its form is variable from bushy to narrowly upright when young. With relatively good soil, sun to part shade and regular summer irrigation, this tree does very well here, even thriving as a street tree.

Ocimum gratissimum (Lamiaceae) Clove Basil, Tree Basil

Grown by Lee Read in Los Altos:

This is an interesting species of basil that's probably native to tropical regions of Africa, possibly India, and is widely grown in home gardens. It is a tough, robust perennial that is known to grow 9 ft tall where it's happy. It won't be that happy here but could still reach 4 or 5 ft given sun, well-drained soil, moderate irrigation and protection from frost. It has light green, velvety leaves with the predominant fragrance and flavor of cloves with some thyme added in. It blooms with whorls of whitish flowers on branched racemes. Both leaves and flowers are used as seasoning. It has a long history of use in traditional medicine to treat a wide range of ailments. I began to wonder how anybody manages to die where this plant is grown.

Pelargonium hirtum (Geraniaceae)

Grown by Judy Wong in Menlo Park:

Judy is justly pleased that her unusual little plant has continued to grow from seed she germinated last year. It's native to the summer-dry Western Cape Province of South Africa where it grows in rocky and sandy areas and is relatively common on the Cape Peninsula. It's a little subshrub that develops short, somewhat woody, succulent stems. It has soft, hairy leaves that are very finely divided giving the plant a fluffy, fern-like appearance. It is summer dormant and may defoliate during extended dry periods but will remain evergreen with a little careful summer watering. In a pot, it will certainly need occasional water in summer. It blooms from late winter into spring with umbel-like clusters of 3-6, small, lavender-pink blossoms.

Salvia spathacea 'Kawatre' (Lamiaceae) Hummingbird Sage

Grown by Betsy Clebsch in La Honda:

Early October rain followed by weeks of warm, dry weather has thrown everything out of whack and Betsy's hummingbird sage is starting to bloom months out of season. Hummingbird sage is one of our best native perennials. It is endemic to California and grows in our coast ranges from Napa to Orange. It spreads, usually politely, by rhizomes to form a lush, handsome, 1- to 2-ft-high mat of deeply textured, triangular, light green leaves 6 to 8 in. long. From spring until fall, it puts up flowering stems that stand 1 to 2 ft above the basal mat with inch-long flowers in dense, evenly spaced whorls. All parts of the plant are oily to the touch and have a strong, deliciously fruity fragrance. Most commonly, the stems and floral bracts are purplish and the flowers are crimson. 'Kawatre' was selected by Nevin Smith and named for the Girl Scout camp in the Santa Lucia Mountains where it was found. It was given cultivar status based on its abundance of flowers and their carmine color that changes to rose as they age. Betsy clued us in about the origin of the camp's name which comes from Kamp, Water, and Tree. Hummingbird sage is so adaptable it grows on any soil including serpentine and clay, in shade under oaks and madrones or in open sunny areas where summers are mild. It will grow with no supplemental irrigation in areas that get at least 15 in. of rain a year but usually looks better with a little summer water. Hummingbirds will stake out this plant and work it over and over again throughout the day. Small song birds relish its nutritious seeds. Deer leave it alone.

Trevesia palmata 'Micholitzii' (Araliaceae) Snowflake Aralia, Snowflake Plant

Grown by Katie Wong in San Jose:

Katie was so taken with the Snowflake Aralia that she saw in Marcia Donahue's garden that she drove to San Marcos Growers to get one. It's a striking, evergreen tree or large shrub with large, round leaves to 2 ½ ft across and deeply lobed creating intricate, snowflake-like patterns. The young leaves have a silvery fuzz that furthers the snowflake comparison. Mature ones are glossy, dark green and are held on stout, 2- to 3-ft-long petioles. Small, yellow flowers crowded into dense balls bloom in spring. The species is native to tropical forests in India, China, Thailand and Vietnam where it can grow up to 30 ft tall. It's more likely to be about half as tall in our gardens with a habit similar to that of *Schefflera* to which it is closely related. It prefers a humid environment,

humus-rich soil with regular moisture, and light shade or some cool sun. It can also be grown as an impressive houseplant. It is reported to be hardy to about 25-30° F.

~Jackie Doda~

Resources: *Am. Hort. Soc. A-Z Encyclopedia, Botanica, California Native Plants for the Garden, Flora, Native Treasures, The New Book of Salvias, Sunset Western Garden Book*, and many websites.