

WHS Plant Notes for October 2013

Heteromeles arbutifolia (Rosaceae) Toyon, Christmas Berry

Grown by Richard Tiede in San Jose: Toyon is the name the Ohlone called this shrub. It grows almost everywhere in California, on every soil type from sand to clay to serpentine, in exposed sunny sites and lightly shaded woodlands. It's usually seen as a large shrub 8 to 15 ft tall, but can grow into a multi-trunked tree. There are very, very old specimens on Santa Cruz Island whose size and habit resemble live oaks. It's evergreen with attractive, leathery, deep green leaves. It flowers at the branch tips in early summer with showy, flat-topped clusters of white flowers that resemble tiny, single roses. As nights cool, the large berry clusters ripen in shades of crimson to bright red. They've usually been eaten by birds or have dropped by mid-January. Toyon can take a couple of years to get established in the garden; but, once it settles in, it grows at a moderate rate and is long-lived, undemanding and beautiful. Frequent shallow irrigation, heavy fertilization, shearing, crowding, and deep shade can turn it into a pest- and disease-ridden mess. Richard also grows 'Davis Gold', a UC Davis introduction with beautiful orange-yellow berries. It is reported to be a more robust, more disease resistant plant. Richard has said that birds definitely prefer its berries.

Hypocyrtia nummularia (Gesneriaceae) Goldfish Plant

Grown by Dick Dunmire in Los Altos: The genus assignment for this plant is a rapidly moving target. At this moment, The Plant List says it's *Hypocyrtia*. It is a beautiful epiphytic shrub from tropical South America with short trailing stems, shiny dark green leaves and reddish orange, tubular flowers. The flowers are inflated in the middle and narrow down at the mouth to suggest the body and puckered mouth of a goldfish. It's sold as a hanging houseplant with detailed care instructions that are nothing like the conditions Dick's plant is thriving in. His has hung outside, in a 6 in. pot, with some protection from a lemon tree, for somewhere between 10 and 15 years. A few of those winters had nighttime temperatures that dipped into the mid 20's and humidity was high only when it was raining. The plant is happy with this arrangement and has bloomed almost continuously.

Osmanthus fragrans var. *aurantiacus* (Oleaceae) Orange Sweet Olive

Grown by Dick Dunmire: This is an erect, evergreen shrub with mid-green leaves. It grows to about 10 to 12 ft tall and 6 to 8 ft wide. With age, it can grow twice that large. It's best with regular irrigation and prefers afternoon shade. Older plants can tolerate full sun. For 3 to 4 weeks, usually during October, it produces clusters of intensely fragrant, tiny, orange flowers along its stems. The fragrance is distinctive but leans strongly toward apricots. Growers have a relatively low rate of success propagating it, so it can be hard to find in nurseries and often sells at a premium price.

Pentagramma triangularis, syn. *Pityrogramma triangularis* (Pteridaceae) Gold Back Fern

Grown by Judy Wong in Menlo Park: This is a small, dainty-looking rock fern. It's native to most of California, over to New Mexico and up into British Columbia. It grows mainly on shaded, rocky slopes and banks in a variety of habitats. The fronds grow 6 to 10 inches high from short rhizomes. The small, 2- to 4-in.-long, dark green leaves are triangular in outline and held on polished, dark brown stipes. The golden yellow, waxy powder that coats the undersides of young fronds is unique to this fern. As the fronds mature, this is obscured by the dark brown sori. Given some irrigation in the dry season, it is capable of keeping some green fronds all year; without it, they curl and die in summer. New ones appear with autumn rains. Gold back fern is very pretty in a woodland or shaded rock garden setting. With good drainage and only occasional summer water, it will grow in most soils including poor soil and clay. But successfully transplanting and establishing it can be difficult. Most people stick with growing it in containers.

Psidium cattleianum (Myrtaceae) Strawberry/Lemon Guava

Grown by Katie Wong in San Jose:

Strawberry guava is a native of Brazil. It has been available in California since about 1870 and has been a very popular fruit tree among homeowners through all these many years—as much for its ornamental value as for its fruit, which is sweeter and less musky than the tropical guava. For us, it usually grows as a multi-stem shrub about 8 to 10 ft tall and wide. It has very beautiful, reddish to golden brown, peeling bark. Young leaves are bronze aging to leathery, glossy, dark green. Its flowers are typical of the myrtle family with 5 white petals and a multitude of protruding stamens. It produces 1-in. round fruit that ripens from fall into winter becoming nearly black, deep burgundy when fully ripe. They're good for jam, jelly, ice cream, drinks and desserts but are usually eaten out of hand after removing the leathery sepals at the bottom. They're easy to grow in any soil in full sun to part shade, pest and disease free, amenable to being hedged and hardy down to about 22° F. Regular irrigation is needed for proper fruit development and ripening. Lemon guava is a variant with slightly larger, slightly sweeter, yellow fruit. It's larger and a little less cold hardy than strawberry guava.

Salvia spp. (Lamiaceae) Sage

Grown by Richard Tiede:

Richard brought 3 beautiful sages. *S. x 'John Whittlesey'* is a hybrid of *S. microphylla* x *S. darcyi* that's named for the well-known plantsman and nursery owner in Oroville. It makes a nice, full mound about 2 to 3 ft tall and wide and blooms from spring through summer with spikes of red flowers with maroon calyces on maroon stems. Richard's *S. macrophylla* is a distinctive form collected in Ecuador. The backsides of its leaves are a soft shade of purple and the stems and petioles also have a purple tinge. It blooms most of the year with brilliant cobalt blue flowers in very dark blue calyces. This is a fast growing, 6 ft or taller plant with large, arrowhead-shaped, very sticky leaves. *S. splendens 'Van Houttei'* has long, tubular flowers in a gorgeous shade of dark red. It's a fast growing shrub to 3 or 4 ft tall and wide. It want some afternoon shade.

Vitis rotundifolia (Vitaceae) Muscadine, Southern Fox Grape

Grown by Lee Read in Los Altos:

Muscadine grapes are native to the southeastern states. These are large, vigorous, long-lived vines. The oldest known cultivated vine dates to about 1584 and is still producing fruit on Roanoke Island, NC. They scoff at heat, humidity, pests and diseases. They prefer sandy soil and will need regular irrigation during our dry season. There are over 300 cultivars with fruit color ranging from bronzy green through red and purple to black. The fruit is large and round with thick, tough skin. It's produced in small loose bunches, ripens from late July through mid-October and needs heat to develop good sugar levels. It's used to make sweet dessert wines but some vintners are also making dry table wines with them. Muscadine juice and jelly is fantastic. They're also eaten fresh. The recommended technique for this is to put the scar end between your teeth and break the tough skin, squeeze the sweet insides into your mouth, toss the skins for wildlife to eat and either spit out the seeds or just swallow them whole. Lee has been growing two cultivars for about 11 years. 'Tara' was bred at the University of Georgia and has bronze fruit known for its high sugar content. 'Ison' was developed at Ison's Nursery in Georgia and has black, medium/large fruit with excellent flavor. Both are self-fertile and highly rated.

~Jackie Doda~

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