

WHS Plant Notes for October 2014

Aloe reitzii (Aloaceae) Reitz's Aloe

Grown by Jennifer Dungan in Mountain View:

In nature, this aloe only occurs within a very small area in South Africa. It grows as a solitary, stemless rosette of sturdy, blue-green leaves that arch upward from the base and are armed with small, sharp teeth along their margins. It usually grows to about 3 ft tall and 4 ft across. While most aloes are winter-blooming, this one blooms in late summer. It produces a single, branched inflorescence with its flower spikes held well above the foliage. The flowers are beautiful, dark orange-red and curve downward to overlap each other and lie flat along the stem. While the spike's growing tip churns out more dark red buds, the maturing flowers at the bottom of the spike gradually fade to yellow. It takes about 5 to 7 years for a seed-grown plant to begin flowering. Jennifer bought her plant from Annie's Annuals about 5 years ago and, right on cue, it has flowered for the first time. This is a spectacular aloe for a large container or a sunny, well-drained area that's rarely or occasionally irrigated. It has survived down to 20° F at the Ruth Bancroft Garden.

Crataegus pinnatifida (Rosaceae) Chinese Hawthorn

Grown by Lee Read in Los Altos:

Chinese hawthorn is native to northeastern China and Korea. It is a very pretty, small tree with a lot to recommend it for gardens, starting with being nearly thornless. It has dark green, lobed leaves that turn red before they drop for winter. In spring it's covered with dense clusters of white flowers followed in fall by clusters of bright red, crabapple-like berries about 1/2 in. in diameter. They remain well into winter after the leaves have dropped. The berries are edible and, according to Katie Wong (who presented Lee's hawthorn for him) and at least one WHS member who tried one, they are a little tangy and a lot mealy. But Katie says that by adding enough sugar they're commonly turned into candy and desserts in China. She thinks that Lee has been growing it for about 10 to 12 years and estimates that it's probably about 8 ft tall now. They're reported to reach 15 to 20 ft tall with a 10 to 15 ft spread at maturity, perfect for smaller gardens. It prefers full sun, moderate irrigation and is not picky about soil as long as it has decent drainage. It is susceptible to fireblight.

Eriogonum giganteum (Polygonaceae) Saint Catherine's Lace

Grown by Liz Calhoon in Los Altos Hills:

California is home to over a hundred species of *Eriogonum* and is the center for its genetic diversity. There is a buckwheat for just about every ecological niche in the state and they have enormous habitat value for beneficial insects, birds and other small fauna. You don't really have a butterfly garden in California unless there are some eriogonums. They range in size from small, mat formers to this one, a woody shrub that grows to 6 ft tall and wide when it's in flower. It's native to Santa Catalina Island. It has woolly, gray leaves and flowers from spring until hard rains break down the brittle flower sprays. In May, it begins to cover itself with tiny, cream flowers in flat sprays up to 2 ft across. In September, they transition through beautifully subtle shadings and finish dark rust red in fall. They're good in dried arrangements and will stay whatever color they are when they're removed from the plant. It grows happily in clay soil with no irrigation. Snap off all the old flower stems in winter to keep it tidy.

Melothria scabra (Cucurbitaceae) Mexican Sour Gherkin, Mouse Melon

Grown by Katie Wong in San Jose:

This cucumber relative is native to Mexico and Central America where it has always been part of the diet. Its name in the various indigenous languages there usually translates to something like Mouse Melon. Foodies and home gardeners in the rest of the world have discovered it recently and in the US it most often goes by the common name Mexican Sour Gherkin. It hasn't entered the mainstream produce market yet but is grown in backyard gardens and can sometimes be found in farmer's markets. It's about the size of a large Thompson's seedless grape with irregular pale and dark green striping like a tiny watermelon. It has a crunchy texture and a cucumber-like flavor with a bit of sourness. It's used raw in salads, added to stir-fries or actually pickled. The plants look very much like regular cucumbers with small yellow flowers. It's said to be easy to grow although the seedlings can be very delicate. Katie was sure hers were dying a couple of times but they eventually took off and have grown rampantly. They will climb up to 10 ft by curling tendrils and produce an abundance of fruit from mid-summer to frost. It needs sun, humus-rich soil with good drainage and consistent, regular irrigation. Unlike regular cucumbers, it has no pest problem.

Vitis vinifera (Vitaceae) Wine Grape

Grown by Nancy Schramm in Gilroy:

A vineyard planted along Hecker Pass in the 70's was set to be torn out. Armed with advice from a friend who practices Bonsai, she sawed off some vines at the ground, took them home and prepared and stuck cuttings. She achieved a success rate of about 90% thanks to proper timing and cutting material. I won't try to go into the details here so, when you're ready to propagate grapes, give Nancy a call.

Jackie Doda

Resources: *California Native Plants for the Garden*, *Sunset Western Garden Book*, and many websites.