

WHS Plant Notes for February 2015

Freesia laxa (Iridaceae)

Grown by Judy Wong in Menlo Park:

A few years ago this little bulb was classified as *Lapeirousia laxa*. Other synonyms that you are likely to find it labelled are *Anomatheca laxa*, *A. cruenta*, *Lapeirousia cruenta* and *Gladiolus laxus*. It's a winter growing, spring blooming, summer dormant corm that's native to winter rainfall areas of several countries in southern Africa. It has light green, grass-like foliage to 8 in. tall that's arranged in a fan typical of the iris family. Its slender flowering stem grows about 12 in. tall and usually produces about 6 upward facing, bright scarlet flowers with a dark red blotch at the base of the 3 lower tepals. It goes dormant after flowering and setting seeds. It grows easily from seed and will bloom 5 or 6 months after sowing. In fact, it often seeds about invasively and has naturalized in some regions of the US.

***Lachenalia* spp.** (Hyacinthaceae) Cape Cowslip

Grown by Judy Wong in Menlo Park:

There are over 100 species in *Lachenalia*. The vast majority occur in the winter-rainfall regions of the Cape in South Africa. Like our own native bulbs, they begin to grow with autumn rains and want a dry summer dormancy. Most send up a pair of strap-shaped leaves and a single spire with many small, tubular flowers. They are only marginally hardy for us and need to be protected from freezing. They are easy to grow and will increase by offsets and seeds. You can also make more from leaf cuttings that will develop bulbils along the cut end. Judy showed a couple of species this month. ***L. mutabilis*** is native to sandy, stony slopes in the north and southeastern Cape. It produces a 10-in.-long, slender spire packed with small, delicately colored flowers. The immature portion of the flower stalk is blue with beautiful pale purple flowers tipped with maroon with yellow inner petals just peeking out. As the flowers age they turn pinkish and then yellowish-green. ***L. pustulata*** is one of the easiest and most robust species of *Lachenalia*. It's often found growing in large colonies in stony clay soils in the southwest of the Western Cape. Its strap-shaped leaves have interesting, blister-like bumps on their upper surface. Its flower spike is about 8-10 in. tall with narrowly bell-shaped flowers in shades of cream, pink or blue.

***Prunus salicina* 'Santa Rosa'** (Rosaceae) Santa Rosa Plum

Shown by Steve Staiger:

Most of the fresh plums sold in North America are cultivars of *P. salicina*. It is commonly known as Japanese Plum but is native to China. In the 1600's, it was imported into Japan where improved varieties were developed. Horticulturists John Kelsey and Luther Burbank brought stocks from Japan to the US in the late 1800's. Burbank used this stock to breed many varieties, including Santa Rosa and Satsuma, and launched the plum industry in California. Santa Rosa plum was introduced in 1906 and, by the 1960's, it accounted for 40% of all the plums produced in California. I suspect that Santa Rosa's historical significance means more to Steve than its yummy fruit or maybe its history makes the fruit sweeter for him. Santa Rosa plum is fast growing and vigorous and bears prolifically in California. It is said to need 300 to

400 chill hours. It blooms abundantly covering its bare branches with white flowers from late January to early March. It is self-pollinating but will bear more prolifically if another variety is nearby. It is also a good pollinizer for other plums. Its fruit ripens late June into July and emits a sweet, fruity fragrance while still on the tree. They have dark purplish red skin, red flesh and a complex set of flavors. There's a little tartness just under the skin, sweetness accompanied by an intense fruity aroma in the middle and slight tartness again at the pit. Unfortunately, you will never get this experience from a plum from the grocery store since stone fruits don't continue to develop their flavor and sweetness after they're separated from the tree. A ripe plum straight off the tree is a wonderful thing. If you have room in your garden for a fruit tree, make it a plum. And you can't go wrong with Santa Rosa. Its rootstock will determine its size and care.

Tephrocactus articulatus var. papyracanthus (Cactaceae) Paper Spine Cactus
Grown by Katy Wong in San Jose:

This cute, little cactus is from western Argentina. It grows with segmented, cylindrical stems and can grow about a foot tall and wide. The plump segments develop interesting, flat, papery spines about 3 in. long that look wicked but are totally harmless. At their base, however, there are tiny barbed bristles that stick in your skin and can be very irritating and hard to remove. It's said to be easy to grow and hardy down to 15°F. It will grow and bloom best in full sun and needs excellent drainage of course. The segments tend to detach from each other very easily and root where they fall. Spring is its main growing season but some new segments might be added in fall as well.

Jackie Doda