

## **January 2013 Frankie Dennison: Everything you wanted to know about hardy fuchsias**

Well-known fuchsia expert, Frankie Dennison was appropriately attired with the fuchsia theme for the evening and it was evident that her Master Gardener expertise on this topic is well known by many organizations where she volunteers and speaks (King/Snohomish County, Bellevue Botanical Gardens, et al). As a NW Fuchsia Society member, Frankie will be going to this fall's British Fuchsia Society's Fuchsia Convention in Stratford Upon Avon, England, where she will be speaking on "Fuchsias in the USA". This is quite an international recognition and we soon understood why. With over 148 hardy fuchsias in her ½ acre lot, Frankie knows her hardy fuchsia stuff from first-hand experience. Later on in the Q&A period, she was asked how did she become such an expert in this field and her answer was failure of a hanging fuchsia basket that she received. There's nothing like overcoming failure to spark a lifelong interest. Frankie is well-known in the fuchsia societies and speaking world and we were fortunate to have her available. We in the NW are the envy of the fuchsia world, since we have a superb climate and acidic soil conditions for fuchsias, whereas England where most propagation began centuries ago, has clay soil and gardeners must struggle to keep them alive.

Along with praising their attributes (which came later), she began her session with a little bit of fuchsia history. Fuchsias are native to Central and So. American regions, where they were discovered as early as the late 1600s and brought to England from voyagers. They are temperate-zoned, not tropical, however. Thus, they do well up and down the Pacific coast where moisture and moderate temperatures prevail. There are 122 named Fuchsia (Onagraceae) species, subspecies and varieties that grow wild in Mexico, Central and South America and New Zealand/Tahiti, from which new hybrids emerged ever since the 1850s, with England leading the field of developers. Dr. Paul Berry, a botanist and leading authority on *F. Magellanicus* came to the NW to conduct pollen stain tests on these fuchsias, determining that many are hybrids. The berries are edible and have been used for wine, jams, blue-pollen face paints (NZ Maori tribes) as well as dye for shrunken heads.

**Fuchsia Attributes:** Many of their virtues include: hummingbirds adore them while slugs leave them alone. Their sizes can range from ground covers, to a foot tall and up to 12 ft. tall shrubs, so they can fit nicely into the front, middle or back of a border. They don't grow beyond their allotted space (except maybe Maureen's climber 'Lady Boothby'), they never need dividing and they don't self-seed. Fuchsia foliage has presence even before the blooms kick in—the leaves varying from variegated, large and soft to tiny and hazy. And unlike most flowering plants, they bloom continuously for 6 months, generally very prolific when the weather cools off in September/October and into December (if mild). Their hardiness depends on your soil and drainage, because we learned that these plants have a tap root type system (from which lateral roots develop that support the plant) and don't like to sit in soggy conditions. Their blooms which are smaller and more tubular than the annuals, are just right for a hummingbird's beak. Blossom parts are called sepal, skirts, pistol and stamen and range from only a quarter inch to doubles with 2-inch or more wide blossoms. Colors are abundant with glorious shades of pinks, peaches, salmon, oranges, purples, green and whites.

**Care & Feeding:** One of the biggest myths associated with hardy fuchsias was dispelled when Frankie told us that they don't need to be in the shade—they do just fine in full sun and in fact,

are better bloomers. So, think about where you want it placed, as they will take 6 hours of sun. We also learned that planting for extra cold tolerance will be helpful. Plant your hardy fuchsia in well drained, good soil four inches deeper than it comes out of the 4 in.pot. Make sure the roots are developed. Even if the tag instructs you to plant it in shade, it will bloom better in sun—just not extremely hot spots. Fuchsias can also be planted in containers — the perfect way to draw hummingbirds to your deck — but they will require more water. Keep the soil enriched with organic flower food (rhody food, 20-20-20 works well) and watered well in the heat. Although they are heavy feeders, no amount of fertilizer will increase fuchsia height because they are genetically programmed. Hide the pruning shears in fall. Let the entire woody structure stay put until mid-spring. These plants revive slowly. When you see green shoots in spring, then prune back one-half to two-thirds, but do not cut back to the ground. Take off dead wood and get rid of wispy stems that grow on new wood. What appears to be a small wad of green stems will become a fountain-shaped bush loaded with blooms by August/September. Do not mulch around the base of the plant as it will rot the roots. In very cold winters, the plant will act like a herbaceous perennial, dying back to the roots and reviving as new shoots appear. In a mild winter, the entire woody structure may winter over. In effect, the plant alternates between being a shrub and a perennial. Pests associated with these hardy fuchsias include a few sucking (mites, thrips, aphids, mealy bugs, white fly) and chewing critters (tomato hornworm, deer, bunnies), but generally slugs and snails will not eat them. Frankie recommended misting/spraying the underside of the leaves in the afternoon because the suckers don't like to go to bed in a wet bed. Otherwise systemic insecticides work well too. Rust is another problem for fuchsias, as the fireweed plant/fir trees pass the rust around in the air. Increased air circulation around the fuchsias will help solve this problem.

**Q&A Session:** Sawdust mulch? Remove it, since it will rot the roots. Procumbens that has rooted on the ground? Limbs can be cut where rooted and dug up to start new plants. Any winter interest? They're just sticks in the winter. Can the flowers be dried? Yes, but it's hard because they're so fragile. Should the black berries be deadheaded? No, they'll just fall off naturally. But they are edible and can be sugared or used in jams. Aside from growing up trellises, can they be trained for bonsai or topiaries? Yes, many varieties can be trained for both. Where to find great fuchsias? At the Center for Urban Horticulture's Fuchsia Society sale on the first weekend in April (check the Friday garden section of Seattle Times). Also, Jordan Nursery in Stanwood, Minters Earlington Nursery in Renton, or Flower World are good sources.

Many of us used to the big, blowsy 'annual' fuchsias, those chorus girls of hanging baskets, are now ready to graduate onto these amazing hardy fuchsias. Judging from the 60 beautiful slides of different varieties that Frankie brought along, it won't be long before we're among the seriously fuchsia-addicted. Frankie described fuchsia society shows, sales, webs ([nwfuchsiasociety.com](http://nwfuchsiasociety.com)) and beautiful displays at the Locks' CarlEnglishGardens and BellevueBotanical Gardens. And when the wind blows their little trumpets....it's like they're garden whisperers. Frankie is not the only fuchsia advocate out there. She stated that hardy fuchsias definitely make the list from Tracy DiSabato-Aust's book "50 High-Impact, Low, Low-Care Garden Plants". Tracy's "perfect plants" must have most or all of these important characteristics: Multi-season interest, colorful foliage, long-lasting blooms, outstanding texture, lasts five years or longer, tolerates heat and humidity, cold-hardy, deer-proof, pesticide and insecticide free, infrequent or no deadheading, no heavy fertilizing, no staking, requires infrequent or no division, requires infrequent pruning, not

invasive or overly aggressive, tolerates drought, architectural form. Sounds like another worthwhile read for our 'book review corner'. Frankie left us with this thought—Try hardy fuchsias in your landscape and you'll find the perfect bloomer that works well for low maintenance NW landscapes. We were also left with the possibility of a tour of her Kenmore site in full fuchsia floral display (Sept? Oct?). Frankie was a breath of flowers to come and was roundly applauded.