

One of the best things about writing a gardening column is the wonderful people I have the honor to meet. This last week I visited with Joe Siegel of the Peninsula Fuchsia Society. Every time I mention him and his fuchsias I'm told how wonderful he and his garden are. Drive or walk up to the end of Torval Canyon Road off of Front Street in Poulsbo and you'll see why. But be quick because in a few weeks Joe will be putting his fuchsias to bed for the winter.

Joe was bitten by the fuchsia bug more than forty years ago. He bought 'Moonglow' from Albertsons on sale. "Little did I know," he said. Today over 380 fuchsia plants festoon the eaves around his house and nest in three tiered shelves in the front yard. There are 380 or more fuchsias in the greenhouse in the back yard.

Joe keeps meticulous records on his computer; each plant is labeled and has a locator number. Collecting fuchsias is his retired-life's work. Siegel is always willing to take time to share his knowledge and joy of growing fuchsias, saying, "Stop by any time."

One of the best ways to learn about fuchsias is to attend one of the many shows in Kitsap County and Seattle, Siegel said. The Peninsula Fuchsia Society meets the third Tuesday of each month at 7 p.m. at Clearbrook Inn, 12295 Schold Place NW in Silverdale. Membership fees are ten dollars a year and includes a newsletter full of fuchsia lore and information.

If you have access to the Net, key in <http://members.xoom.com/fuchsias/epbimages/index.htm>, Joe said. You'll need to click on a few links to get to the Northwest Fuchsia Societies pages. One link on this site shows color photographs of hundreds and hundreds of fuchsias. This site is invaluable if you're trying to find or identify a fuchsia. An added bonus is the music; the tunes will be well remembered by those of us over fifty.

If you don't have time to join a fuchsia society looking up informative sites on the web is a good idea. Use a search engine and key in the word fuchsia. Most of the books written about fuchsias are out of print or only available in England. Joe recommended "A Creative Step by Step Guide to Growing Fuchsias" by Carol Gubler and "How to Grow Fuchsias a Practical Guide" (which has very good information but no photographs) by Ken Pilkington.

Now is a perfect time to find hardy fuchsias at your favorite local nursery. Ask if the plant has been outside for a few seasons or if it was raised in a greenhouse. If raised in a greenhouse or a baby keep it in the pot and give it protection this winter. If it is a seasoned adult plant put it in the ground in your garden and it will reward you with cheery blooms this next summer. Don't cut your hardy fuchsias back until early spring. The old growth helps protect the plant from winter cold.

To overwinter non-hardy varieties strip off all the foliage and store them in a sheltered place (greenhouse, cold frame, garage), watering sparingly and in spring begin watering and fertilizing, bringing them out in April after danger of frost. Joe has to trim woody stems for greenhouse space but recommends leaving the woody growth as is if you can. Some people cut their fuchsias back and bury them in the pots in a trough in an area of their garden until spring when the plants are dug up and brought out.

Spring begins the watering and fertilizing season. Fuchsias are heavy feeders needing a 20-20-20 weekly fertilizer until fall. Fuchsias grown for show are fertilized even more.

Each year Joe takes cuttings of every plant he has to insure survival of his collection. Cuttings are how fuchsia growers often share their plants with each other and with new fuchsia gardeners. The cuttings work best from new growth not from old wood. Siegel uses a mix of one-half peat moss and one-half perlite. Joe saves Dairy Queen Sunday cups and said, "They make perfect propagators." Plastic blanket cases serve as mini greenhouses for the propagation. Starting cuttings in water works well too but tends towards weak roots Joe said.

Meerkirk Gardens on Whidbey Island is the place to go to see fuchsias Siegel says, adding that his dream is to have a garden like Meerkirk in our county. Joe says there are over 6200 named varieties of fuchsias to choose from, adding, "I love the versatility of the plants. They're the best tranquilizers in the world."

You can email comments to Peg at gardenmentor@yahoo.com or in care of this newspaper.