

I'm never ever again going to complain about Puget Sound rain. Fay and Ernie Linger, Ann Lovejoy and my husband and I all flew up to Sitka, Alaska, the weekend before Mothers Day because we girls were three of the featured speakers at Sitka's first ever GardenFest. I'm here to tell you it was very cold and very rainy, but the people were as sunny, warm and nice as can be. This week I thought you'd all like to learn a little bit about gardening in Alaska.

Sitka, on Baranoff Island, is one of the most beautiful places I've ever been. But boy can it ever rain. The local gardeners told us they get 120 inches of rain each year, sometimes even more. That's at least 10 inches per month, or two and a half inches per week. WOW!

Instead of using manure, the locals harvest kelp, seaweed and herring roe after storms wash it above high tide. Sitka soil is comprised of real glacial till (we thought that's what we have). Their till looks like black sandy gravel with small round stones mixed in.

One really successful Sitka gardener, Florence Welsh, uses a mix of one part native soil, one part fine sand, and one part kelp/seaweed/herring roe in her raised beds. Last year the Welsh family bought several chickens and use the manure too. Florence and her family raise all their own produce and also grow flowers for incredible bouquets. Sitka residents bid on her bouquets over the local public radio station KCAW. The money raised helps fund local programs.

Blue flowers abound in Sitka gardens. Every garden we saw included forget-me-nots, meconopsis, delphiniums, lupines and hydrangeas. Forget-me-nots were chosen as Alaska's state flower because for so long the state felt forgotten by the folks in the lower forty-eight, and statehood came so slowly.

Shade and moss are the two main deterrents for gardening in Sitka. We asked Patty Bickar how she combats them and her reply was, "I cry a lot." Patty, however, grows hundreds of fuchsias each year and winters them inside in her greenhouse built over her garage. One fuchsia is forty years old. Nearly all the gardens we visited had greenhouses or root cellars where gardeners winter plants over or start plants for spring and summer.

Moss has always been a problem in Puget Sound lawns, but in Alaska it's even worse. Their lawns are practically all moss, but it's thick, spongy and stays green. Most Sitkans didn't grow flower gardens until about five years ago, the extension agent told us. He said a huge lawn was put in at the pioneer cemetery and it got everyone interested in growing lawns. When the people figured out they could grow better moss than lawns, they decided to grow flower gardens instead and now lots of folks are trying their luck at vegetables too. All the gardeners we met use raised beds.

We visited Penny Brown's nursery called Garden Ventures. Penny's nursery borders the shoreline and has Mount Edgecumbe as its backdrop. Edgecumbe is a dormant volcano emerging directly out of the sea. I couldn't decide what was more stunning, the nursery or the mountain.

Two of our fellow speakers were Alaskans Les Brake and Marion Owen. Les Brake writes and speaks about how to create "Romance in the Garden." He's spoken at the Northwest Flower and Garden Show. Watch for "Horticulture Magazine" in July to see his incredible garden in Willow, Alaska. Les gardens from May through September (October in good years) and then looks out on snow and icicles for the rest of the year. He creates ice art to pass the time and add beauty to his snow covered garden. "Sunset" magazine will feature his ice art this December. Marion Owen lived in Puget Sound for much of her life but now resides in Alaska. She is a renowned photographer and one of the writer/editors of "Chicken Soup for the Gardener's Soul."

Fay talked on landscaping for birds, so of course we did some birding in Sitka too. We saw literally hundreds of bald eagles and huge black ravens. We quit counting eagles one day at fifty. KCAW radio station has a huge black raven on it's logo. The ravens eat crane fly larva, but the downside is that they also pull up big chunks of lawn in the process. In one hour along the shore Fay and I saw dowichers, marbled godwits, great scaups, buffleheads, pintails, northern shovelers, mallards, Barrow's goldeneyes, common loons, ruby crowned kinglets, rufous hummingbirds, and belted kingfishers. Sitka is a birder's paradise.

Alas, I'm out of my allotted space for today. I hope you'll all remember the gardeners of Sitka once in a while when you're out in your sunny Northwest gardens. Until next week, happy Kitsap County gardening.