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A Walk through my Garden - February 2009

by Betty Coffelt, UC Master Gardener

Drive around the valley neighborhoods and you'll notice many different kinds of bulbs are starting to pop out of the ground. Freesias might just be making the ground heave, while Dutch iris can be over 20 inches tall. In our climate the early bulbs start blooming around Thanksgiving with later ones coming on until May and June.

In my yard paper whites are the first to bloom followed by 2 different old fashioned narcissus. These both have small multiple flower heads: one is yellow with white and the other is orange with white, and both will continue to bloom over a long period and last for a long time. Early hyacinth are also flowering in my yard right now. I have 6 miniature butterfly gladioli that bloom each year in January - February and then again in the summer when the other "glads" are blooming. Soon crocus will be emerging from under my St. Augustine grass. Every year when I see them I am reminded of when we lived in Nierenberg, Germany. There I would look out of our living room window and see them blooming in their glorious colors under winter conditions that are much colder and more grey than here. Then there is this beautiful pink flowering bulb that was given to me, but I still don't know what it is?

Other plants than are blooming now are the first of my 5 hellebores. These plants are attractive all the way around. They have a relatively large cup- or bell-shaped flower on a nodding stem, which makes them droop. The blossoms perform well in flower arrangements, like camellias the hellebore flowers are good floaters in a bowl of water. One type of hellebore is called Christmas rose and another is called Lenten rose; these are long-lived plants that add color to the garden for several months in winter and early spring. The Christmas rose is white, but the Lenten rose can be white, pink, purplish, cream and greenish, often spotted with deep purple. Both have very attractive foliage with big long leathery leaflets.

A plant with slightly unusual foliage is the woolly grevillea, which is also just starting to show its unusual pink-cream flowers in my yard. This Australian native is related to the very attractive protea blooms, but has fine-textured foliage and dense clusters of long, slender, curved flowers. The foliage reminds you of rosemary, but is less stiff. There are many kinds of grevillea, but the woolly grevillea has narrow leaves that are covered with hairs that give the foliage a grayish cast.

At different spots around the yard are the large gerbera daisies that bloom off and on all year long. I've noticed that the pinks and reds seem to do the best in our winter months, but they are available in a multitude of colors.

My yard is not just home to flowering plants. In fact much of my yard supplies food for our family. In one garden area my husband built a grape arbor that is 8' wide by 16' long by $6\frac{1}{2}$ feet tall. On three of the four corners we planted grape vines that my husband grew from cuttings. We have 2 Thompson seedless from my folks and 1 ruby red from his cousin. The grapes were allowed to grow to the top of the arbor before we cut the trunks to allow canes to develop and cover the top of the arbor. The canes covering the arbor shade my husband's worm bed. On the two long sides of the arbor we have planted berry vines. On one side a thornless blackberry and on the other side a nectar berry. Both are ancestors of plants brought from Missouri when my Mom's family came to CA in the 1930's. We are now harvesting avocados, oranges, tangerines, lemons and grapefruit. The grapefruit tree is 50 years old. My Dad planted it in a spot where he broke through the soil hardpan layer with dynamite.

My next project is the vegetable garden. Later this month we till the ground in preparation for planting in early March. The garden itself is approximately 20' by 25'. I'm planting some tomato seeds this week, so they will be ready to go outside to harden off in mid march. I'll let you know next month what else I plan to plant.

Other chores this month include feeding citrus trees with a special blend fertilizer designed for them. Follow the directions. I divide the total amount of fertilizer into three parts putting 1/3 on in February or March, 1/3 on 6 weeks later, and the last 1/3 in another 6 weeks. Camellia, gardenia and azalea are acid loving plants that should be fertilized after bloom. If you have scented geranium you can trim them to about 18" later this month. This also is a good time to separate plants that have gotten too big for their space or need or need to be planted some place better so they will thrive.

HAPPY GARDENING!

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