

HYBRIDIZING With Ron Monnier

I'm thrilled to see there is interest building towards getting folks involved in hybridizing here in the Northwest and California! This list of local hybridizers has been far too short for far too long. I applaud those that have kept the craft going, and appreciate the work they've been doing to keep hybridizing going here in the USA and keeping us inspired.

Many have harangued me for years to start a hybridizing program. I was hesitant because I thought that the technical level of hybridizing was beyond my ability. Hybridizing was always an interest though and I thought it was something I might try someday.

In the fall of 2004 I decided that I'd attempt some crosses. I didn't know what pollen looked like, how best to label crosses, when to pick ripe berries, what seed looked like, how to plant seed. I really didn't know too much. So one evening when I was looking at some of the seeds I had sown (which was really a mushy mess that I thought might have seeds in it), I was thrilled to see some tiny plants growing in my little containers! I raced to the house to tell Debbie all about it Debbie didn't exactly share the zeal and felt that going to the greenhouses in the dark wasn't as good an idea as waiting until morning. Dragging her out the next morning I learned my first big lesson about growing fuchsias from seed. Slugs find seedlings tasty and had gotten in the container and eaten my first years efforts.

By late summer 2005, I'd had the opportunity to talk to hybridizers Leon Hubbard, Ovie Pearson, and Mary Cook. They'd all given words of encouragement and some helpful ideas that inspired me to keep trying. A common theme among them was to have a creation in mind before even starting. Goals might be to create some new color combination, create plants with gall mite resistance, or have a familiar blossom with a different growth habit. In the end one might not end up with the creation one was attempting, but one would at least have a focused direction with which to start. My idea was to attempt a strong upright and winter hardy variety that had dark blossoms similar to 'Maxima'.

I learned a lot the fall of 2005. The big lessons were how best to pick blossoms to receive pollen vs. picking the best blossoms to provide pollen. I also learned what ripe berries looked like and when to pick them, and what fuchsia seeds look like. I learned a lot that year by both reading and observation. It really hit home how some plants are good pollen producers (Dads), other make good seed parents (Mons). There are many that neither makes pollen nor have the ability to set berries.

With the lessons learned in 2005 I was feeling good about how to proceed in 2006. I determined that my new quest was to create a landscape plant that has large flowers consisting of a white tube and sepals and a black corolla. I took a whole host of plants with white tubes and sepals and crossed them with varieties that have black corollas. I got easily distracted. Wouldn't this make a good cross and wouldn't that make an unusual combination. Between October and the end of December we'd made 120 distinct crosses that yielded about 1200 seedlings. Here came the next big lesson as a fledgling hybridizer. How to deal with the horde of new plants.

I'll be the first to admit that the world has an ample supply of re/purple and red/white trailing and lax upright fuchsias. So for me it has been pretty easy to

eliminate the first 1000 or so seedlings. Problem is I still have about 200 that we've retained because of intriguing flower color. We are currently evaluating the new plants we've retained for growth habit. At this point though, every time we contemplate eliminating one from the selection, I feel like I am about to murder off my children. I do understand the need to only retain the best, and will continue to be brutal in the selection process.

Here we are in the fall of 2007. We have begun the crossing process. Our goals continue to be on the quest for substantial winter hardy landscape plants that hold their large and/or small blossoms well. We are still on the quest for a variety with a white tube and sepals and a black corolla. Creating any new and unusual variety would be fun. But, that's what it is all about, having fun.

For those that think hybridizing is far too technical, please think again. I found it much easier than I thought once I gave it a try.