

JUNE'S GARDEN

Crocosmia and Himalaya Blackberries

In late summer along roadsides, beach accesses, vacant property and in some gardens grow clumps of trumpet orange-yellow flowers on outstretched spikes accentuated by dark green sword-shaped leaves, a plant that thrives in our mild coastal weather to grow as profusely as the Himalaya blackberries. Neither of these plants is native to the area. There is no record as to when they were first brought here; both are more robust in growth than some of the native flora. Their roots have sunk deep in our soil. The bright orange flowers of Montbretia, botanical name Crocosmia, do brighten the landscape, and it has become a tradition to gather Himalaya blackberries for pies, cobbles, and jam.

Visitors unfamiliar with the name of Montbretia and who admire the plants have asked about them and where they could buy some. To the surprise and delight of one visitor, who had stopped me to ask about the plant, I pulled several stalks - flowers, leaves, corms and all -- and handed them to her. I failed to tell her to be careful where she planted them as they soon will take over a garden space. It usually takes muscle and a strong spade to edit them from the garden. Montbretia can grow into thick clumps. It multiplies by sending out white underground runners called stolens. These runners develop more corms and in time will produce a substantial clump.

I learned more about the history of crocosmia in a recent article in "The Garden," a garden magazine published by the Royal Horticultural Society. The article noted that most species are indigenous to eastern South Africa. There are 10 known species in the genus. Five of these species have survived in cultivation in Great Britain for more than 100 years. In the late 1870's two of these species were crossed. The result of this cross was a vigorous orange-flowered hybrid classified as Crocosmia x crocosmiflora, better known as Montbretia. By the turn of the century it had naturalized in mild coastal regions of the British Isles and Europe. While referred to as a garden escapee, in many places it was likely to have been evicted from gardens. The article also added that this plant had naturalized in so many parts of the temperate and subtropical world that it is regarded as a world-wide weed.

Montbretia was originally bred as a half-hardy pot plant grown in conservatories and greenhouses to provide cut flowers in the late summer. France was the center of crocosmia breeding. In 1960 Graham Stuart Thomas did much to reawaken interest in this genus, and Alan Bloom introduced a new hybrid, C. Lucifer. The flowers of C. Lucifer are brilliant red and the plant can grow four feet or more in height. In the last several years this hybrid has been introduced to grow in gardens here on the north coast. Last summer in front of Hane's Bakery and Cottage Apts., C. Lucifer's beautiful red flowers added color to the landscape growing with hybrid grasses and other tall plants. A few years ago I planted them in my own garden and have noticed that the bright red flowers attract many hummingbirds. I have found, however, that C. Lucifer multiplies like Montbretia.

The article lists 38 crocosmia hybrids. Their heights range from 28" to the tallest, C. Zeal Giant, which grows to 71". The foliage colors range from dark to light green and bronze, the flowers from pale yellow to saffron yellow, orange and red. A recent introduced hybrid from the Netherlands, C. Babylon, has 2 1/4" red flowers with bright yellow centers. Some of these hybrids have been bred for the flowers to face upwards; most are trumpet shaped.

One of the last gardens we visited while in England was landscape designer and lecturer Christopher Lloyd's home and garden at Great Dixter. Lloyd is known for using a mixture of colors in his flower beds with berried shrubs, interesting branched deciduous trees, shrubs with different colors of foliage and leaf patterns mixed with conifers.

"Zing" is a word that has been used to describe colorful flower combinations Lloyd uses in his garden designs, mixing orange and red colors with the more familiar choice of all-pastel hues. His garden was an example of his designs, not styled formally but informal mixtures of colors, textures, and patterns. Many English gardens we toured devoted parts of their gardens to raising vegetables, fruits and herbs. Lloyd raised artichokes. We asked the guide about the two large fields of these plants that bordered the flower gardens. Our question was, "Did he raise them to sell?" The guide's answer was, "No, Lloyd loves artichokes and gives them away to his friends for presents." Lloyd's garden reminded me of many Cannon Beach gardens. Artichokes grow well in our climate, and our gardens "zing" with orange and red crocosmias. I didn't see any of these plants in his flower beds, but I'm sure many of us would be willing to share a box or two of corms if he ever visited our area.

Here's a thought: every visitor that comes to our town would not be allowed to leave without a bag of crocosmia corms and a slip from the vines of Himalaya blackberries. After all, we should share our bounty of color and fruit.

It's best to have all your bulbs planted by the end of October for next year's spring and early summer flowers.

For more unusual flowers, plant Allium bulbs. There are many varieties. A. azureum have large, deep lilac starlike flowers with a metallic sheen. The compact clusters that form a globe shape on a 24 - 26" leafless stem, when dried are also used for winter arrangements. Smaller varieties are effective in rock gardens or borders.

In nature there are neither rewards
or punishments; there are only
consequences.
Robert B. Ingersoll



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"However," replied the universe, "The fact
has not created in me a sense of obligation."
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