

THE BEE IS BACK!

Actors Cabaret of Eugene reboots a hit



Three years ago I was laughing my gluteus maximus clean off, spellbound as kids wrestled with orthography. The Actors Cabaret of Eugene space was packed with everyone from hip 20-somethings to the pastor at my mom's church to this critic, and we all raved.

The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee is a Tony Award-winning musical that follows the ecstasy and the agony of competitive spelling, examining puberty and parenting along the way. Now, a mere three years later, the spelling wizards are back under a new director, Mark Van Beever. I posed the actor/director with a few questions on the eve of opening to find out what's fresh in this production.

Three years is a short turnover, and I want to know why ACE decided to mount another production of the same show so soon. Van Beever is all enthusiasm for the play: "Out of the 35 productions I have done at ACE, there are only a couple shows I would do all over again, and *Spelling Bee* is one of those ... The bits of improv and audience participation keep that spark of energy just racing through the show." And while the last production was a hit, Van Beever notes "There were some things I wanted to try differently this time."

What's going to be different? The message will be louder. While the play is really fun, it also has some sharp words for parents who are living through their children. Van Beever says, "I chose to make this production a little more real, you know, a little darker. Not your typical show-tune singing musical." Under the patina of fun music and rolling jokes, Van

Beever hopes "that audience members realize how even though some people are weird, or bizarre, or just not the way you are, that they are special, unique individuals who deserve your patience and tolerance, if not respect. And that winning isn't everything and that losing doesn't necessarily make you a loser."

"Wow!" Van Beever hardly knows where to begin when I ask him about the music. "William Finn has a way of putting emotion right into the music ... then when you add a talented cast, the show can bring you to tears, then just as quickly, back to hilarity."

If you've been to any show at ACE in the last nine years, you've probably seen Van Beever. If he's not center stage, he's directing music, or waiting tables or quite possibly doing all three. I've been fascinated by his commitment to ACE for years, and I asked what is it about the Cabaret that keeps him coming back. "Honestly, it's because I get to work with two amazing gentlemen who have been teaching me so many things, not only about theater, but about myself as a director, an actor and human being. Joe (Zingo) and Jim (Roberts) open the doors to such great opportunities for me to work with the newest released shows and collaborating with writers and composers with new works from all over. It's my home away from home ... well, it's my home. I live in my house, but ACE and theater are my life."

The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee opens Friday, Jan. 11, and runs Fridays, Saturdays and select Sundays through Feb. 9. ■

GARDENING

BY RACHEL FOSTER

ORNAMENTAL NATIVES

Some of the best native plants for our climate

Studies show that native plants attract a wider variety of pollinating insects than standard garden ornamentals do, and pollinators need all the help they can get these days. That's just one more reason to include native plants in your landscape. This top 10 list of showy, well-behaved native shrubs reaches a bit beyond the boundaries of the Willamette Valley, but all will tolerate conventional garden conditions, including summer irrigation.

Vine maple (*Acer circinatum*)

You can call this super plant a shrub or a small tree, depending on the scale of your property. It prefers moist, well-drained sites with partial shade but it is also quite adaptable, although perhaps a bit little less tolerant of drought and sun than Japanese maple, which it resembles. Vine maple's attractions include spring foliage of the most vivid green imaginable, splendid fall color and, in some specimens, red coloration of young branches. Selections exist with coral-colored stems, golden spring foliage or finely divided leaflets.

Variegated red-osier dogwood (*Cornus stolonifera*, *C. sericea*)

Red-osier dogwood makes a great spot of color in winter, especially if it is cut back hard each spring to promote plentiful new growth. But 'Hedgerows Gold,' a native selection with yellow leaf margins, is gorgeous in spring and most of the summer, too. It grows in sun or shade, and appreciates moist soil.

Silk tassel (*Garrya elliptica*)

This coastal native can be a scrawny plant, and the dark, evergreen leaves don't exactly jump out at you. But after a few years it will bear strikingly long, silver-green catkins in winter, and you'll remember why you planted it. Male plants have the showiest catkins. Plant silk tassel in sun, with irrigation, or full shade. You can also train it on a north-facing fence.

Long leaf Oregon grape (*Mahonia nervosa*, *Berberis nervosa*)

In addition to its graceful sprays of fragrant, light yellow flowers in mid-spring, this elegant forest evergreen has the finest leaves of all our native mahonias. Growth is slow to moderate, to about 2 feet. I think the leaves lose much of their beauty in full sun, where it is better to grow *M. repens* or *M. aquifolium* 'Compactum.'

Mock orange (*Philadelphus lewisii*)

Its flowers may not be as large as those of some mock orange cultivars, but they are pure white, abundant and fragrant as can be. This ultimately tall and rangy shrub is best in the background, but it needs sun to bloom well and adapts well to dry soils. Keep it more shapely by pruning out older stems from time to time.

Pacific ninebark (*Physocarpus capitatus*)

The warm-brown stems and upright, arching habit of this big shrub are best appreciated in a spacious setting where you won't be tempted to prune it too much. It also boasts attractive foliage and showy, rounded heads of small white flowers in spring. Pacific ninebark is a

wetland plant in nature but will grow just about anywhere.

Pacific rhododendron (*Rhododendron macrophyllum*)

Familiar at the coast and in the mountains, this handsome rhodie isn't often used in gardens. It's a classic, large-leafed, medium to large rhododendron with a slightly open way of growing. Flowers vary from white to deepish pink, but are most often somewhere in between.

Western azalea (*Rhododendron occidentale*)

You'll see this fabulously fragrant deciduous azalea in the Siskiyou Mountains and along the Rogue River. In gardens it grows slowly to about 8 feet, and blooms quite late in spring. The flowers are white or light pink, with deep pink and yellow markings. It seems to be less susceptible to the mildew that so often mars the leaves of other deciduous azaleas.

Red flowering currant (*Ribes sanguineum*)

There's a lot of discussion among naturalists and gardeners about what conditions this plant prefers. Best to think of it as a short-lived shrub, give it good drainage and moderate summer water and be prepared to replace it. Flowers are usually pink in the wild, but deep red and pure white selections are available. White ones bloom a week or more before the pink and red ones. The nectar is an important early food source for rufous hummingbirds, who don't seem to care what color the flowers are.

Evergreen huckleberry (*Vaccinium ovatum*)

With neat, glossy leaves, pink flowers, compact growth and tasty fruit this coastal native is both a choice evergreen and a tremendous work horse in the garden. It grows best in sun or light shade, and makes a nice hedge with a minimum of pruning. I've seen it doing fine in a bewildering variety of locations, but be prepared to water it in summer if you plant it in full sun. ■

Rachel Foster of Eugene is a writer and garden consultant. She can be reached at rfoster@efn.org