

HOME

THE CALIFORNIA GARDEN

Winter fireworks show

Vivid choices, including fuchsias or red-hot pokers, can light up your yard.

By LILI SINGER
Special to *The Times*

WINTER is a season of surprise. It keeps a loose schedule, rarely hangs on for long and, occasionally, brings rains. Although some people find these months too dreary, gardens can take on a glow — a sparkle of seasonal fireworks whose colors cut through the gray.

Winter performers from California and beyond provide a dynamite display — bursts of blooms that explode in brilliant yellows and reds, oranges and pinks, purples and flashes of blue.

The midcentury ranch house of Northridge retirees Ralph and Barbara Crane slows traffic — and inspires neighbors. Now appearing: aloes with waxy red towers of flowers, grasses with seed heads of violet and amber, and *Euphorbia* 'Sticks on Fire' with incandescent stems. The show also includes an emu bush (*Eremophila* 'Valentine'), an Australian fuchsia (*Correa* 'Ivory Bells'), Mexican tarragon, native salvias and strawberry trees from southern Europe and Ireland.

Although the Cranes have lost count of their plants, they have a method to their madness. All are from Mediterranean climates and require little water. Three signature plants are repeated out front to unite texture and tone: an Australian ground cover that blushes in the cold (*Myoporum parvifolium* 'Burgundy Carpet'), a very blue agave from the Southwest and Mexico (*Agave parryi*) and a tall, arching grass from Texas (*Muhlenbergia lindheimeri*).

The pyrotechnics reemerge out back, with pots full of winter-blooming firecracker plants (*Russelia equisetiformis*) and Christmas cactus in pink and magenta. A separate edible garden sports red-stemmed beets and neon pink Swiss chard 'Bright Lights.'

Across the valley in Sherman Oaks, stands of red-hot pokers ignite the winter garden at the Spanish-style home of Freda and Henry Vizcarra. Planted less than two years ago from 2-gallon cans, the red-hot pokers have grown into grassy mounds as wide as manholes, each with more than a dozen chest-high yellow-and-red spikes.

This robust variety, *Kniphofia* 'Zululandii,' from the Transvaal region of South Africa, was chosen by designer Marie Gamboa of Garden Pacific in Silver Lake. She chose 'Zululandii' for its size and sizzling shades "so typical of Spanish landscapes."

"They explode at vacation and party time," Gamboa says, "and continue well into spring."

Bees and hummingbirds find the flowers irresistible. The Vizcarras also are enamored, and now that their 12-year-old needs less turf on which to play, they want more *Kniphofia* in another spot.

One source for red-hot pokers and other unusual plants is Shelley Jennings, owner of Worldwide Exotics in Lakeview Terrace. Her home garden adjacent to the nursery comes into full bloom each winter.

South African bulbs are coming up, including orange *Chasmanthe*, salmon and yellow *Homeria*, "puppy proof" red-leaved *Oxalis* — all "color poppers," she says.

Her other seasonal favorites are *Montanoa schottii*, a daisy tree from Mexico, and *Hypoestes aristata*, a South African shrub with lavender spikes.

"And aloes, of course," she says. "Those blues and oranges after a rain — it takes your breath away."

Elizabeth Schwartz, who teaches "Gardening With California's Native Plants" at UCLA Extension, has other suggestions: *Ceanothus* 'Dark Star,' which has sapphire flowers, and other California lilacs, which are flowering early this year.

In the dry shade of trees, she likes to plant creeping barberry (*Mahonia repens*), a 2-footer with small yellow flowers. 'Golden Abundance' is an 8-foot hybrid with plenty of late-winter flash. Both provide blue berries that attract birds.

For the best fruit, though, choose toyon, the common red-fruited species (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*) and the yellow variety called 'Davis Gold.'

"Wonderful color and lots of it," Schwartz says, "until the birds demolish the berries."

Manzanita also is fantastic, she says. There are dozens, from ground cover to tree size, and most demand good drainage. *Arctostaphylos* 'Lester Rowntree' is spectacular for its deep red bark, gray leaves, pink flowers and round red fruit. 'Sunset,' named for the magazine, has gorgeous bark and faint pink flowers.

Manzanita flowers are favorites of hummingbirds, as are blossoms of native *Ribes*. Schwartz cites the white-flowering currant (*R. indecorum*) and 'Dancing Tassels' (*R. malvaceum*), which has long, drooping chains of tubu-



KEN HIVELY *Los Angeles Times*

STANDOUT: The aloe plant's spiky red blooms accentuate the garden at the Cranes' Northridge home.



KEN HIVELY *Los Angeles Times*

CHEERY: Dwarf strawberry tree has striking orange-red fruit.



GARY FRIEDMAN *Los Angeles Times*

FIERY: Red-hot poker is a favorite of hummingbirds.



KEN HIVELY *Los Angeles Times*

SUNNY: Mexican tarragon is related to daisy and marigold.

Colors that can set your yard ablaze

A sampler of plants from around the world that set cool-season gardens aglow:

Aloe species: Succulents with yellow, orange, red or pink flowers.

Strawberry tree: *Arbutus unedo*. Shaggy red bark, snowy manzanita-like flowers and round orange-red fruit. 'Elfin King' is a 4-foot dwarf.

Manzanita: *Arctostaphylos* species. California plants with beautiful bark, flowers and fruit. Attract hummingbirds.

'Sticks on Fire': *Euphorbia tirucalli*. Succulent shrub with pencil-thin

salmon-red stems — and caustic, milky sap.

Toyon: *Heteromeles arbutifolia*. Native shrub or small tree with leathery leaves and large clusters of red or yellow berries.

Red-hot poker: *Kniphofia* species, also known as torch lily. Perennials in varying heights, all with long-lasting flowers that bees and hummingbirds love.

Muhlenbergia lindheimeri: Graceful tall grass with long-lasting seed heads.

'Burgundy Carpet': *Myoporum parvifolium*. Low mat of tiny leaves that darkens with the cold. Crowds out weeds and needs little water or care.

Barberry: *Mahonia* species, also sold as *Berberis*. Native shrubs with yellow flowers and bird-pleasing berries.

Mexican tarragon: *Tagetes lucida*. Perennial with golden flowers and strongly scented, deep green leaves.

— LILI SINGER

lar pink blossoms.

Of course, practically every garden has room for more. Schwartz just planted a dogwood with the seriously protracted name *Cornus sericea* ssp. *sericea*, better known as 'Silver and Gold.' It lights up her hillside with bright, leafless golden stems.

At the Vizcarras' garden in Sherman

Oaks, designer Gamboa just added more winter pizzazz.

On the south-facing "desert side" of the frontyard, she grouped blue-green agaves and yellow-spiked *Aloe vera* with glistening golden barrel cactus.

Beneath ancient deodar cedars, the darker woodsy side has shell-pink sasanqua camellias, a radiant yellow *Ma-*

honia and a dormant Japanese maple (*Acer palmatum* 'Bloodgood').

This little tree could leaf out next month, one can't say for sure. But when its crimson foliage emerges, our winter show soon will be over.

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WRITING HOME

A global passport

The Most Beautiful Gardens in the World

Alain Le Toquin
with Jacques Bosser
Harry N. Abrams, \$60

Are you itching to tour great gardens but are too busy or broke to travel? For about the cost of a taxi from Paris to Versailles, this elegant book can take you away — and let you return again and again.

Alain Le Toquin's 150 color images, including 12 impressive gatefolds, welcome you into 32 public or private gardens on five continents. The collection includes the estates of the wealthy and powerful, landscapes built by artists, reforested park lands and spiritual spaces for meditation. In a single day, you can see the Lion Grove Garden west of Shanghai, a tree-fern-filled forest at New Zealand's Titoki Point Garden or a giant chessboard of narcissuses at a French chateau.

Each garden evokes its own space and time, and tour guides Le Toquin and Jacques Bosser provide the history, cultural context and architectural influences of each destination. No passport needed.

— LILI SINGER

Ready for their closeup

The Kitchen Garden A to Z: Growing, Harvesting, Buying, Storing

Mike McGrath,
photos by Gordon Smith
Harry N. Abrams, \$45

With its art-book publisher, "The Kitchen Garden A to Z" is as much gorgeous coffee-table book as it is primer on growing vegetables, herbs and edible flowers.

Almost 350 color photographs by Gordon Smith include extreme close-ups, reminiscent of Georgia O'Keefe's work, that make the reader see vegetables and herbs in exciting new ways. Who knew a chard leaf, neon green veined in ruby red, was such a thing of beauty?

Author Mike McGrath, who hosts a nationally syndicated gardening program on public radio and is former editor-in-chief of *Organic Gardening* magazine, writes in a folksy, no-nonsense style, providing easy-to-follow instructions on topics such as building raised beds, composting and organic pest control.

The heart of the book lists plants from artichoke to zucchini. Left-hand pages contain growing tips and tricks, and the right-hand pages are art-quality photographs of the matching vegetable, herb or flower. Readers may be inspired to start a vegetable garden — and to frame some of the photographs for the kitchen.

— SAMANTHA BONAR

From Italy, with style

Tuscany Artists Gardens

Mariella Sgaravatti,
photos by Mario Ciampi
Verba Volant, \$60

If you dream of a home in the Tuscan hills, get ready to meet the neighbors: a talented group of artists from around the world, following a centuries-old tradition and taking their cues from the land's glorious hues and warm Italian sun.

The book's 30 essays reveal the visions and motivations of painters, sculptors and conceptual artists who connect with nature and their gardens in distinctive ways. The 230 color photographs show styles that include formal, surreal and the untamed. These artists' eyes are superb at framing views, setting a sculpture into the scene and blurring the boundaries between studio and landscape.

You'll recognize plants — lavender, bay laurel, olive — and conditions like those in our Mediterranean climate. Once you've absorbed the land and these people, you may want to check out "Tuscany Artists Homes," an earlier work from the same passionate team.

— LILI SINGER