



Gardener's Notebook

Volume 19, No. 2

News, Advice & Special Offers for Bay Area Gardeners

April 2005

Spring Gardening Issue



Pacific Coast Iris * Companion Plants * Portable Greenhouses * Understanding Soil pH & more

Unite these “companions” for a showy spring garden

When planning a spring garden it's a natural instinct for gardeners to focus on plants that go together visually. While this is clearly a good idea, of equal importance is putting plants together with similar soil, light and water needs. Complete compatibility maximizes garden resources (including your time) by helping you better prepare your soil and avoid over- or under-watering.

Two showy spring flowering plants that are great companions are **columbine** and

digitalis. They both grow best in partial shade and are woodland garden favorites.

The pair enjoy moist, but not wet, slightly acidic soil, need regular watering, prefer cool conditions and, with

their colorful flowers, attract both humans and hummingbirds.

Columbine or **Aquilegia** with its contrasting sepals and petals and

interesting nectar spurs has been cultivated in Europe and America since the 1600's.

Its botanical name *Aquilegia* could have

been derived from the Latin words *aquila* meaning “eagle” or *aquilegus* meaning “water collector.” Both names reference the nectar spur that to some people may look like the talon of an eagle and to others a water receptacle.

Native Americans are reported to have used it on a variety of ailments including stomach aches, heart trouble, coughs, and poison oak, and as a love charm. Europeans used it for sore throats, small pox, and more.

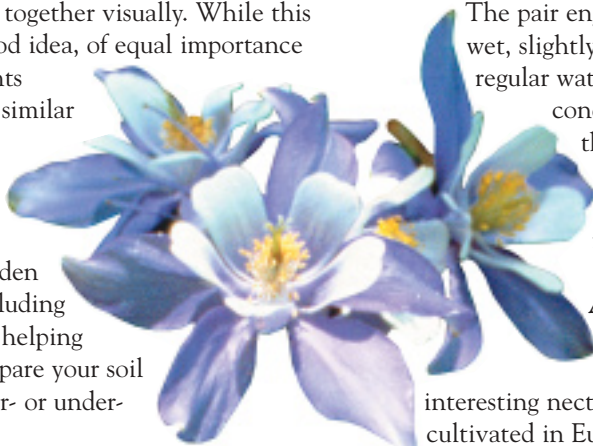
Today we prescribe columbine's soft pastels, vibrant purples, reds, yellows, blues, oranges and white blossoms as a cure for color shortages in shade gardens.

Columbine is a member of the *Ranunculaceae* (buttercup) family which includes other beautiful plants such as anemone, clematis, helleborus and delphinium.

It can be divided into tall and dwarf varieties, where the tall plants such as ‘**McKana's Giant**’ can grow two to three feet tall and small columbines such as **A. flabellata** top out at about nine inches. The lacy foliage on the plant is attractive and commonly compared to that of the maidenhair fern.

Deadheading the flowers will prolong the bloom of your plants. If you leave some flowers to go to seed, at the end of the season, you'll find the seed head is attractive and the plant will return the follow year. Do not expect hybrid varieties to reemerge as is the case with many hybrids. Columbines are terrific cross pollinators, so who knows what you'll end up with if you plant several varieties.

A hummingbird magnet (they are the *continues on page 8*)



Gardening Guide

April

Plant

🌱 Load your garden with the season's most colorful plants. Just about everything we offer is budding or blooming!

🌱 Vegetable starts and seeds are in great supply now. Pick up a portable greenhouse and start your seeds today.

🌱 Plan ahead and plant perennials and other specimens to fill your garden with summer color.

Fertilize

🌱 Use **E. B. Stone Organics Sure Start** with all new plantings to help them get established quickly.

🌱 Fertilize with **E. B. Stone Organics All-Purpose Plant Food**, and **Citrus and Fruit Tree Food**. See our staff for more plant-specific fertilizer recommendations.

Use **Agricultural Lime** to balance your soil's pH (see page 4), especially in your vegetable beds.

🌱 Lawns are ready for some attention. Feed them with **GreenAll Pro Formula Lawn Food**.

Prune/Maintain

🌱 Improving the quality of your soil should top your list of spring activities. An optimal loamy soil balance promotes drainage, air and water penetration. Use **Sloat Loam Builder**, **Sloat Forest Mulch Plus** or **Sloat Planting Mix**, which are custom-blended for Bay Area gardens.

🌱 Control pests before they gain control of your garden using the latest environmentally smart techniques and products. Release ladybugs, green lacewings and other beneficial insects to prevent pest damage to your plants.

🌱 Prune azaleas and camellias after they bloom.

🌱 Spray fruit eliminator on ornamental olive, crab apple and other trees where you'd like to prevent the formation of unwanted fruit.

🌱 Continue the war on destructive snails that ravage gardens by night and hide during the day. **Sluggo Snail Bait** works great and is the perfect non-toxic alternative to products containing metaldehyde.



REWARD MEMBERS:

Watch for In-Store special offers

If you haven't joined our free Gardener's Reward program, you'll want to this spring! This year we are offering special “members only” pricing on selected plants and gardening supplies.

Special purchases from growers and garden product suppliers along with our own promotional discounts will add up to considerable saving for our members.

Just keep a lookout for the in-store signs whenever you visit or simply ask one of our Sloat professionals.

New basket and container stuffers

It's about time someone realized that a slightly smaller plant would be better for creating hanging baskets and container gardens. One of our top growers, Cottage Gardens, is now offering 3-inch perennials (down from 4-inch) that are ideal for packing hanging baskets and containers.

This is not like your favorite yogurt brand downsizing their product's already small serving size to increase profits!

Going from 4-inch to a 3-inch is all about convenience and ease of planting.

With a 3-inch plant you are



Photo: Proven Winners

ending up with a more manageable root ball and 25% less nursery soil mixture.

As you can imagine, being able to load a container with more plants (including more varieties) definitely has an appeal.

Sloat has an excellent selection of container and basket making supplies.

You'll find wire basket frames and plenty of beautiful pottery styles. We also offer a new line of **Angel Moss** basket liners, which greatly simplify basket making. Don't forget **Sloat Organic Potting Soil** and a product called **Soil Moist**, which helps container soil retain moisture.

Please try the new size plants and let us know what you think!

Great books for great looking gardens

If you are looking for some gardening inspiration check out our new series of beautiful gardening books by British garden writer Karen Platt.

Platt visited the Bay Area in February and gave a slide presentation on three of her most recent books to Gardener's Reward members.

Silver Lining, Gold

Fever and her latest release, **Black Magic and Purple Passion** have led to her being recognized by the garden publishing world as the leading innovator in gardening books.

Her newest books focus on three distinct and beautiful plant colors.

They explore these plant colors, discuss their

uses in the garden and offer planting and cultural information.

Her passion for plants and strong horticultural background result in some very fine resources for gardeners.

Among the books you will find 6,500 plants identified and over 1,000 excellent color photographs.

The photos and descriptions give readers an opportunity to really become familiar with the plants prior to adding them to the garden.

Her most recent book on black plants comes at a time when

these dark purple, green, red and black plants are being appreciated as never before.

Sloat is pleased to be one of the few places locally that offers her groundbreaking books.

Available at all Sloat Garden Centers

North Bay and Sonoma Garden Expert

Ready to answer any of your gardening questions.



NAME

John Coulston

STORE

Manager of Novato and Sonoma locations

SPECIAL INTERESTS

Shade Gardening

Variegated Plants

Statuary and Garden Art

Creating bird-friendly and balanced gardens

EXPERIENCE

Sloat Professional 7 1/2 years

Twenty years nursery and garden center experience

Northern Marin and Sonoma Gardening expertise

Toured gardens in the U.S. and Europe

Sonoma Resident

Community service as a Member of Ignacio Rotary in Novato

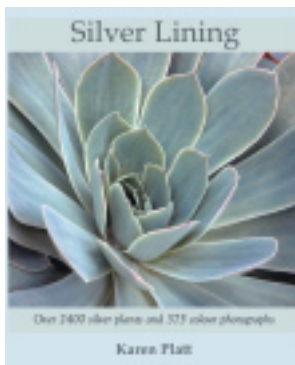
JOHN'S TIPS FOR GARDENERS

1. It is critical to get snails and slugs under control in early spring. Snails and slugs typically come out at night, so they initially may go unnoticed. Small plants and seedlings are particularly vulnerable. Baiting for snails and/or protecting your plants with copper strips will help avoid plant loss or damage and get you off to a great start this season.

2. Good drainage is very important to most plants. Poor drainage is one of the most common causes of plant mortality. Test the drainage before planting by digging a hole and filling it with water. Note how fast the hole drains. For slow draining soil you can either raise the soil level by creating a mound (raised bed) and/or dig a bigger hole. Mix Sloat Loam Builder with native soil to condition it and improve drainage.



Over 2700 dark plants and 425 color photographs.



Over 1400 silver plants and 575 color photographs

Karen Platt

Why your soil's pH is so important and how to test it

Most gardeners are probably more aware of the pH balance of their shampoo than the balance of their garden's soil.

This is unfortunate because an optimal soil pH is absolutely key to maximizing plant nutrient uptake and therefore plays a major role in overall gardening success.

The 14-point pH scale was created to measure alkalinity and acidity. A reading of 14 is alkaline, 0 is acidic and 7 is neutral.

The ideal pH level for most garden plants is about 6.5, which is slightly acidic.

With most California garden soils ranging from 5.5 to 8, the gravity of the situation doesn't seem too serious until you realize the pH scale is logarithmic, like the Richter scale. The difference between a reading of 7 and 8 is ten times more alkaline!

Your plants may show signs of a particular nutrient deficiency such as iron even though there may be plenty of this nutrient present in your soil either naturally or from fertilization.

Without the proper pH level, these nutrients are chemically trapped in the soil and can not be absorbed by plant.

To check your soil, consider a **Rapitest** electronic soil tester. It is easy to use, accurate and a great investment. Along with testing pH, this tool can check your soil's fertility by measuring nitrogen, phosphorous and potash.

Once you have a pH reading, you have several choices. You can introduce plants to your garden that thrive in your soil's pH, raise your soil's pH or lower it. To raise pH you'll need to add a product

like **E.B. Stone Horticultural Lime**. To lower pH, add compost material, iron sulfate or F.S.T.

Managing your soil's pH is not difficult but should be an ongoing process as the pH balance is always changing.

Once you learn to test and adjust your soil, you are sure to enjoy more success in the garden.

The Rapitest soil tester includes a great guide that shows the pH preferences of hundreds of plants and trees although you may want to check plant-specific books and websites to get the most precise pH information. It also has an easy to understand guide for adjusting your soil.

Set the stage for a successful spring with an optimal soil pH.



A Range of pH Levels

Hydrangea (blue)	4.0 - 5.0
Azalea	4.5 - 6.0
Camellia	4.5 - 5.5
Gardenia	5.0 - 6.0
Iris	5.0 - 6.5
Peach	6.0 - 7.5
Ferns	6.0 - 8.0
Mint	7.0 - 8.0



Just about everyone who has deer in their neighborhood has experienced the heartbreak of having their roses, annuals and other prized plants eaten by these beautiful but crafty pests.

Deer stories are among the most remarkable you'll ever hear. They've been called the "mice" of the garden as they can fit through a hole in your fence so small that it appears to defy physics.

They can leap tall fences in a single bound (no running start is necessary to clear a fence). They are even great at limbo. We heard a story where deer slid under the bed of a 4 x 4 pick-up truck that was used to block a driveway and protect a garden while a new gate was being installed.

If you'd like to avoid deer devastation in your garden this year, it's time you tried a relatively new product called **Liquid Fence**.

We introduced this breakthrough deer repellent two years ago and have had nothing but great feedback.

This all natural remedy will not harm humans, animals or the environment. It is simply sprayed on your plants once a month. In the most extreme cases, the inventor, 82-year-old Clarke Kaskie, recommends applying weekly for three weeks, then monthly.

The product does have a strong odor when first applied but it dissipates quickly as the product dries, yet remains very noticeable to deer.

Deer are creatures of habit, so once you have trained them that your garden does not taste good, they will stay away.

Bring us your deer stories and we'll send you home with a super solution!



Soil Products to Supercharge Your Garden

If you'd like to enjoy the most successful (and easiest) year of gardening ever, make a commitment to getting and keeping your soil in tip-top shape with Sloat Planting Mix, Sloat Loam Builder and Sloat Forest Mulch Plus.

Each of these soil products has been custom blended to amend and improve the dominant soil types found in the San Francisco Bay Area. By using these products, you'll increase plant performance and improve soil structure, moisture retention, aeration and water penetration. These soil products are especially effective in taming heavy clay soils and holding nutrients in your soil.



Only at
Sloat
Garden
Centers

Go native with beautiful Pacific Coast irises

Any time you discover a beautiful California or West Coast native plant that you admire, it's a good idea to seriously consider adding it to your garden.

Chances are it will be very easy to grow, drought tolerant, perhaps wildlife resistant, and most of all, fit wonderfully in your landscape.

If you have not discovered wild or hybridized Pacific Coast irises, early spring is a great time to learn about them. The Pacific Coast iris is one of the great botanical treats you can enjoy this time of year as wild irises are blooming up and down the coast from California to Washington.

They are also blooming at Sloat!



PHOTO: SUNCREST NURSERIES

varieties offered by our grower, **Suncrest Nurseries**, provide a rainbow of colors and some very elaborate veining patterns

as well. It is quite easy to fall in love with more than a few of these plants.

In the wild, Pacificas are found growing in dappled shade and in some cases in full sun near the coast.

"Successful growing conditions are more a matter of temperature than sun exposure," according to Nevin Smith, Director of Horticulture at Suncrest Nurseries. "They cannot handle blistering heat nor a combination of excessive moisture and warmth, which can lead to fungal disease."

They prefer soil that is similar to what azaleas need: slightly acidic and well-draining. The irises are perfect when planted beneath an oak tree (just like in the wild), if you happen to have one in your garden.

Pacific Coast irises grow quickly. In just a couple of years you'll have a large, star-shaped clump to provide a rich background for the plant's spectacular blooms.

A big plus for growing irises is their attractive glossy evergreen foliage, which looks great year 'round.

Pacificas are not new to gardeners.

Evidence suggests that they were first cultivated in England thanks to the work of the great Scottish botanist David Douglas. He brought back hundreds of seeds from the West to England in the early 1800's.

Most gardeners have no doubt heard of the Douglas Fir tree. This spring, Sloat gardeners have a chance to become familiar with *Iris douglasiana* as well as *Iris innominata* and *Iris munzii* -- all of which are used to produce the irises in our garden centers today.

"The first local wave of hybridization took place in the 1930's and 1940's in Southern California," according to Smith.

"Joe Ghio of Bay View Gardens in Santa Cruz has done the most in recent times to bring exciting new Pacific Coast Hybrids to gardeners."

Ghio began hybridizing in 1954 and has received nearly all the awards the iris world has to offer. This includes the American Iris Society's Hybridizer's

Medal given in recognition of a body of work done by a hybridizer. Ghio's Pacificas are recognized as the best in the world and a number of them are offered by our grower.



PHOTO: SUNCREST NURSERIES



PHOTO: SUNCREST NURSERIES



PHOTO: SUNCREST NURSERIES

While Pacific Coast irises or Pacificas can be found in the foothills of the Sierra, most of the 11 native species that form this group of plants are found in areas where there is a coastal climate influence. This habit makes them ideal for many Bay Area gardens.

Pacificas are beardless irises that grow from rhizomes, unlike Dutch and reticulatas that grow from bulbs. The hybrid

Pacificas with their "native roots" will make a great addition to your garden. Along with their beauty and interesting history, their low water use and low maintenance (they do not need to be divided as often as other irises,) make them practical as well.

Got lots of bugs in your garden? Let's hope so!

Contrary to what many people would like to believe, having a diversity of insects, and plenty of them, in your garden is a sign of garden health and vitality!



Insects are, in fact, essential for the survival of the human race and play important roles in the balancing of the world's ecosystem.

Gardeners tend to focus on the bad bugs such as mites, aphids, scale and cutworms and

avoid embracing (read: appreciating) good bugs like the fiery searcher, centipede, green pubescent ground beetle, ladybug and syrphid fly.

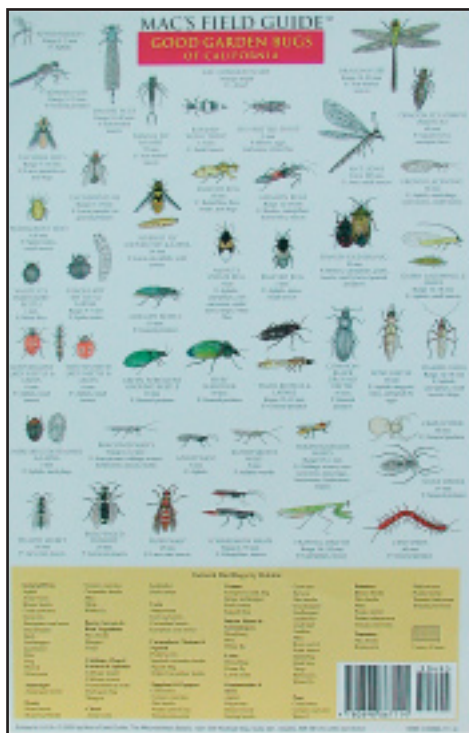
The upshot is that while trying to wipe out the bad bugs, the good bugs (beneficial insects) are often killed in the process.

When you get Katy Thompson, one of Sloat's most experienced nursery professionals, on the subject, she gets really bugged by the fact that many gardeners mistake one of her favorite good guy bugs, the downy leather wing with a bad boy called the blister beetle. A recurring story with an unhappy ending.

Gardeners should want to control bad bugs, but they also need to strive for a balance in the garden which will keep pest problems in check and reduce or eliminate the need for pesticides.

This means learning which bugs are good bugs and which are bad before attempting to control them. It also means learning to include host plants for the good bugs in your garden and accepting some bad bugs and their associated plant damage from time to time.

A good place to start is to get yourself a **Mac's Field Guide** of good bugs and bad bugs of California. This laminated guide has great color illustrations (or mug shots)



as well as habitat and food information on scores of insects.

Mac's Guide makes it easy to I.D. bugs correctly so you don't jump the gun when you see a good guy visiting your prized plants and trees.

Consider stapling a guide to a stake in your garden or finding another way to keep it handy so bugs don't get away before being identified.

Learning the insects in your garden is worthwhile and fun. You will not only have a healthier garden but make some new and perhaps ugly friends at the same time.



Clematis Coming in the May Issue

Next month we will feature some exciting new clematis from **Raymond Evison** and our grower **Hines Nursery**.

We thought it worthwhile mentioning this to you as the horticultural press is a little ahead of nursery production.

A number of articles or mentions about these clematis have already appeared including a feature in *Fine Gardening*, yet Sloat will not have these plants for gardeners until May!

Enjoy the articles and remember you'll be able to enjoy these plants soon.

Get a grip on spring's top tool

Acquiring a good understanding of the utility of all garden tools should be a worthy goal for everyone.

This spring, once you've laid down your gardening spade and fork (discussed in previous newsletters), you should be ready to pick up a quality garden hoe.

Hoes are an essential tool for spring as they are ideal for breaking up soil, preparing seed beds, and removing weeds.

When you look at the heads of two of the most popular hoes, you're sure to grasp a bit of what they are intended for (and what they are not).

The length of the blades, four to six inches, and the fact that there is no place for you to put your foot to increase downward force tells you the hoe is for working the surface soil and not for digging holes.

The heart-shaped pointed hoe, called a Warren hoe, is great for opening seed furrows and working between plants. The more common square-blade hoe is ideal

for breaking up surface clods, grooming soil, and is prized for its ability to uproot young weeds. The square blade hoe is a handy tool to carry around the garden as you inspect and admire your plants. With an effortless swipe, young weeds are removed and beauty is restored.

Now is the time to inspect and then repair or replace damaged or inferior gardening tools. If you don't own a good hoe or need one of the many other tools of the trade, please visit with one of our professionals who can guide you on selection.



Our top quality spring plants are in!

Spring has sprung and our garden centers are full of the season's best and healthiest plants. In most cases we are able to offer plants that have been grown by top local growers. These specimens tend to be better acclimated to the Bay Area and therefore can get established faster and perform better.

Great care is taken when plants arrive at our garden centers. First to insure superior quality and second, to insure that quality is maintained.

Our team of garden professionals is the largest and best trained in Northern California. Local planting knowledge is plentiful and we welcome your questions.

Here's just a sample of what you'll find budding and/or blooming so you can begin planning your garden beds.



Begonias
Cosmos
Columbines
Forget-me-nots
Foxgloves
Marigolds
Alyssum
Daisies
Impatiens
Lobelia
Verbenas
Petunias



Your DreamHouse (or SpringHouse) has just arrived!

For many gardeners a true dream house would have to include a greenhouse.

This spring you can complete your dream house by adding one of our revolutionary self-erecting greenhouses to your garden.

These professional horticultural products provide superior protection for your plants from insects, birds, and weather and will allow you to start seasonal planting earlier.

The **DreamHouse** and **SpringHouse** models can be set up and taken down in five minutes and are truly portable. Constructed with Gro-Tec material, they are 100% waterproof, have rip stop protection and are ultraviolet resistant.



The SpringHouse greenhouse goes up in minutes.

Greenhouses not only protect plants from the elements, but can accelerate growth. By keeping in warmth and moisture, a greenhouse will encourage annuals,

perennials and tropical plants to bloom earlier.

Both greenhouses have screen doors and/or vents to allow you to control air circulation. You will also appreciate the ports for hoses

and electrical cords. SpringHouse measures 78" high x 72" wide x 72" deep. The larger DreamHouse is 78" high x 96" wide x 96" deep.

To learn more about these great new products that will finish off your home and garden, stop by Sloat today.

SLOAT SEMINARS

Attendance is limited. Please call ahead to the seminar location to reserve a seat. Seminar fee is \$5. (Gardener's Reward Program members are free.)

GARDEN DESIGN FOR EICHLERS

Marin residents fortunate enough to live in a home designed by Eichler will really enjoy this seminar. Local garden designer Leslie Patten, has been giving this wonderful and popular seminar on Eichler garden design for years. She will explore plant selections, bed design, do's and don'ts, and much more.

Apr. 3 - San Rafael, Sun. 10 a.m.

ROSE PRUNING

Here's a useful seminar for rose lovers who wish to get the most from these lovely shrubs. Sloat's Richard Avery will discuss and demonstrate rose pruning principals and techniques to keep these plants healthy and blooming all season.

Apr. 9 - Danville, Sat. 10 a.m.

HEALTHY & PET SAFE GARDENS

If you have a pet at home that spends time enjoying your garden, it makes sense to insure that it is a safe and healthy place for him or her. Join local expert Annie Joseph when she discusses common hazards including pesticides that could be impacting your pet now as well as what you can do in your garden to make it a safe and beautiful place for you and your pet. Sponsored by MCSWPP, SWRCB and the SFPUUC. This is a free event!

Apr. 13 - S.F. (Sloat Blvd.) Wed. 6:30 p.m.

Apr. 17 - San Rafael, Sun. 10 a.m.

Apr. 24 - Mill Valley (Miller Ave.) Sun. 10 a.m.

CUTTING GARDENS

One of the greatest joys of gardening is bringing fresh cut flowers from your garden into your home. Learn how to create a productive cutting garden including, choosing flowers and foliage, planting and harvesting techniques, and more with local designer Mary Te Selles.

April 16 - Sonoma Sat. 10 a.m.

COOKING WITH HERBS

Learn how to enjoy herbs from the market or, better yet, fresh from your own garden with local chef Miranda Tarbox. Learning how and when to add herbs to your creations along with understanding how much fresh or dried herbs to use are two of the keys to success.

Apr. 27 S.F. (Sloat Blvd.) Wed. 6:30 p.m.

Ten Locations in San Francisco, Marin, Sonoma & Contra Costa

Richmond District
3rd Avenue between
Geary & Clement
752-1614

Sunset District
2700 Sloat Blvd.
46th & Sloat Blvd.
566-4415

Novato
2000 Novato Blvd. at
Wilson
897-2169

San Rafael
1580 Lincoln Ave.
just off Hwy. 101
453-3977

Mill Valley
657 E. Blithedale at Lomita
388-0102
401 Miller Ave. at La Goma
388-0365

Kentfield
700 Sir Francis Drake Blvd.
at Wolfe Grade
454-0262

Sonoma
23566 Arnold Drive
(707) 939-9400
Hours: 9 am to 6:30 pm

Danville
828 Diablo Road
(925) 743-0288

**Garden Design
Department**
401 Miller, Mill Valley
388-3754

Visit Sloat on the Web: www.sloatgardens.com

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Great plants and great advice to help them grow!

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Companion plants (continued from page 2)

only ones who can get nectar from the spurs), columbines bloom from spring to early summer.

Digitalis, commonly known as **foxglove**, is native to western Europe, parts of Asia and northern Africa. It is a member of the *Scrophulariaceae* family, which includes garden favorites such as nemesia, penstemon and snapdragons.

Its spectacular flower stalks can reach 3-5 feet in height. The tubular flowers, which can come in purple, lavender, pink, white, cream, yellow and other colors are shaped like the fingers of a glove. Legend has it that these 2-inch flowers were given to the fox by fairies to put on its toes so it could sneak up on its prey. The name digitalis actually means finger.

While the plant has captured the hearts of gardeners for centuries, it is also near and dear to millions of heart patients today who use a drug created from its

leaves to strengthen and regulate their heartbeats. The plant is highly toxic so do not consider eating any part of it.



Digitalis purpurea has lovely violet flowers and is perhaps the best known species. A few additional cultivars which

gardeners love include 'Alba' with its white flowers (perfect for a "white garden"), 'Gloxinioides' with fringed flowers in yellow, pink or purple, and 'Foxy,' a smaller growing variety.

A wonderful thing to remember about foxgloves is that all the color tones are complementary which means that massing a single color is an option, but certainly not a necessity.

Plant digitalis about 16 inches apart on center. A nice trick to prolonging the bloom is to cut off the first spike of flowers when the bloom is finished. A second show of flowers will appear on smaller stalks. Let the flowers go on the second bloom if you'd like the plant to go to seed and naturalize in your garden.

Introduce foxgloves and columbine to some other shade companions including ferns and hostas and you will create a beautiful neighborhood of color and compatibility.