

Early Bloomers: A Hint of Things to Come

If you think we've had a cool spring this year ... well ... you're right! It has been several degrees before 'normal'. The fruit orchardists and vineyard managers are saying their fruit producers are two to three weeks behind.

However, there are some early bloomers that, while a touch late, are displaying beautiful colours right now. Three of them (see Grasslands Nursery's ad for colour photographs taken at the Nursery) are the topic of today's Water Wisdom.

The three species are the native Saskatoon (*Amelanchier alnifolia*), golden currant (*Ribes aureum*) and red pasque flower (*Pulsatilla vulgaris 'Rubra'*). Although only the Saskatoon is native to the South Okanagan, the other two plants also do very well in dry, poor soils or those that contain high clay content.

The Saskatoon is a multi-stemmed large shrub that can, in favourable conditions, grow to the height of a tree. It is a terrific addition to a xeriscape garden, particularly if you're looking for a plant that is both multi-functional and provides year-round interest.

It provides shelter and food for local birds, attracts pollinators, and is early to leaf and bloom in the spring. Saskatoon leaves add colour to the fall landscape; in the winter, its defoliated stems take over this task as its dark red/purplish bark provides colour to the dormant landscape.

Golden currant reaches about five feet high and six or more feet in spread at maturity. The bright yellow flowers have an enticing scent that smells similar to cloves. As I write this, bees are pollinating the golden currant flowers as they collect pollen to feed to their larvae. As mentioned, this plant does especially well in clay soil. It is also deer resistant (not deer proof ... deer resistant)!

Be sure your golden currant receives full sun – at least six to eight hours per day. It needs very little water once established. As a general rule, any plant placed in a soil with high clay content should **only** be watered with a drip irrigation system. Clay will hold water well, but is very, very slow to accept water. Anything more than drip irrigation to water plants on a slope will run off and could cause erosion over time.

The third early-blooming beauty is pasque flower. This herbaceous perennial emerges quite early from the ground and has leafy, fuzzy leaves that are grayish-green. It is a prolific bloomer (choose from purple, red or white) and responds well to transplanting. It can self-seed a bit, dropping the seeds from whiskery tufts that emerge after the bloom has faded.

Pasque flower needs full sun and, although the ferny leaves look delicate, it is hardy in our freezing winter temperatures. It is compact, maturing to a height and spread of a foot or two. Consider planting it in front of spring-flowering bulbs. Although it

blooms roughly the same time, the remaining foliage makes a nice screen for dying bulb foliage.

Although it presents some challenges, clay soil is relatively fertile and does not need amending in terms of adding nutrients. In fact, rather than amend the soil to suit the plants, try selecting plants for your existing soil type. It all comes down to lowering your maintenance chores!

Toni Boot is the founder and owner of Grasslands Nursery in Summerland, a nursery specializing in sustainable gardening. Comments and suggestions for future Water Wisdom columns may be directed to her at grassnursery@telus.net or through www.grasslandsnursery.ca