

# Farewell to spring?

[planethorticulture.blogspot.com/2009/04/farewell-to-spring.html](http://planethorticulture.blogspot.com/2009/04/farewell-to-spring.html)

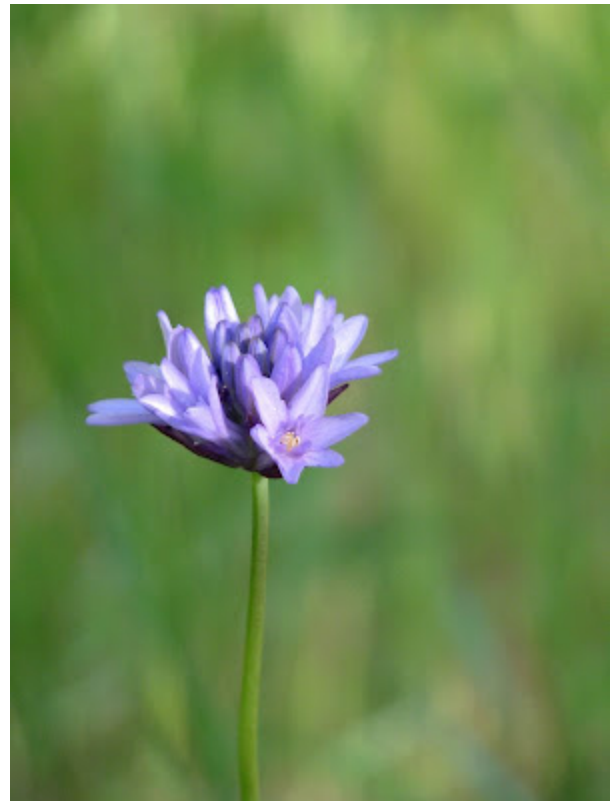
While I do mark my seasonal progress by the plants in flower, the actual progress of the season is well beyond my control. A four day heat wave during the third week of April is enough to tip the balance for many plants. During this short span, lush green hillsides turned tan on their southern and western flanks as annual plants dehydrated by the millions. To mark this turn toward our dry season, two plants on our property along Garnett Creek here in Calistoga at the N end of the Napa Valley, have made their debut. Perhaps the more impressive in terms of sudden appearance is the native bulb (corn) called ookow or wild hyacinth, *Dichelostemma congestum*. Just last week while walking our trails with a friend, I was looking out at the hundreds of blue dicks, *Dichelostemma capitatum*, and commented, "I wonder when the ookow will appear?" It has been a tremendously successful year for blue dicks, some landscapes tinted a lilac-blue haze with their hundreds if not thousands of flowering heads. But last week, while there were still dozens and dozens of blue dicks in flower to be seen, I could not find a single ookow, which I knew should follow in floral sequence.

New on the scene, ookow, *Dichelostemma congestum*.

Today, in the same spot there was not a single fresh blue dick to be seen, but hundreds of ookow - a complete reversal. Given their similar appearance, often identical sites and this "presto-chango" succession, it is no wonder people assume they are the same plant - a cluster of blue-lilac flaring tubular flowers clustered in a head waving on a tall stem above the grasses.

Closeup of ookow. Each flower has three fertile stamens, the other three modified into staminodea, here as three projecting pieces of petal-like tissue colored identical to the petals, each have a forked (split into two) tip.

Forked (or bifid) staminodes flank anthers in center of flower. Pink chalice replace dried up larkspur (subject of Two Blues blog) on sunny hillside.



The second plant to put in an appearance is appropriately commonly named, Farewell-to-Spring, the species I have is graceful farewell-to-spring, or *Clarkia gracilis*. Last week I noticed the first few, but by today there are sweeps of pink. It is similar to many other

Clarkias in being a relatively large, cup-like flower, much like a small tulip. Named for William Clarke of the famous Lewis and Clark expedition of 1804-1806, these large cup type is sometimes called Godetias - and often the horticultural hybrids still are sold as such. Satiny petals of *Clarkia gracilis*, this plant with unspotted petals.

The *Clarkia gracilis* on my hillside has both spotted and unspotted forms, some undecided. The species is fairly widespread, but has a number of named races (subspecies). All are exquisite, but the subspecies *albicaulis*, is unquestionably the showiest with huge tri-colored flowers - a must-try if you see it in a nursery or catalogue (not shown here).

Spot the difference?

The cross-shaped (cruciform) stigma (female receptive organ) can be found in many genera of plants in the Evening Primrose Family (Onagraceae), though not all.

Undecided about spots. Ambivalence is not just a human trait.

The race here qualifies as the subspecies *sonomensis*, the Sonoma graceful farewell-to-spring, though here we're in Napa Co. However having a spot is part of the defining character of this subspecies, so where does that leave the unspotted ones?

Clarkias are one of those annuals that can be very plastic with their form depending on resources; sometimes very tall (2'+) and branched with large (2") petals, other times shrunken into miniature single flowering plants only 2" tall with half inch petals.







Close up of Diogene's lantern, *Calochortus amabilis*.

Another plant to mark the season is the native bulb called Diogene's lantern or yellow fairy lantern, *Calochortus amabilis*. The botanical name, *Calochortus* means beautiful grass, while, *amabilis* means beautiful, thus we have a beautiful, beautiful plant (with grass-like foliage). I saw my first in flower nearly a month ago, but now is when most are in mass flower. It is one of three species of nodding yellow-flowered calochortus, the smallest in most features, but also - and this is important to plants - by far the most widespread.

Although we don't generally go around carrying lanterns anymore, it would make a lovely design for one. Reminds me of those ceiling fan/light globe combos so popular today.

Diogenes was the third century BC Greek philosopher and all around curmudgeon who walked the streets of Athens carrying a lantern during the day, "looking for an honest man", which cynically implied a fruitless search. Heavy stuff to put on a wildflower. Searching around the North Bay looking for an honest wildflower display, would not be fruitless, as this lovely lily family member is common on slopes and canyons in many spots in the North Coast Ranges, though it is not everywhere.

