

First Flowers Fill Fervent Feelings For Fresh Future

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I think every gardener faces this dilemma; plant for now or plant for later. Most do both of course, but if there's just that one spot left, what will go in it? Will it be a baby-blue eyes (*Nemophila menziesii*) for its delightful blue and white flowers making me smile for the next two months only to die, or will it be a penstemon, perhaps flowering this summer, but maybe not even until the following season? It is at this early time of the year, just as the low elevation California landscape has begun to wake up and grow, that I find myself almost desperate for some floral sign that renewal is on its way. Although there will be far more flowers in late March and April, more diversity and more amazing masses and mixes of colors and scents, it is the first wildflowers each season that mark my personal internal calendar and affect me the most. The first shooting star (*Dodecatheon hendersonii*), buttercup (*Ranunculus californica*), toothwort (*Cardamine californica*), hound's tongue (*Cynoglossum grande*), Indian warrior (*Pedicularis densiflora*), checker lily (*Fritillaria affinis*) or scarlet larkspur (*Delphinium nudicaule*) hits me with an intense physical pang of pleasure. Even if I'm alone, I gasp and then the phrase, "Oh look, the first shooting star!" inevitably escapes my lips. This reassurance, that in spite of the desperate economy, or a multitude of personal problems, things are on track, everything will be alright, is so gratifying, that it is hard not to smile. It is one of those "Now" moments, when all past and future concerns have receded to the wonder of the present.

Ceanothus 'Berkeley Skies' in mid February in Calistoga. The soft lilac coloration is hard to capture against the background, but is not missed by the hundreds of honey bees that comb its every flower. In the garden, it is the same craving that attracts me to the earliest flowering bulbs, shrubs, annuals or perennials. To have a ceanothus burst into flower in late January or February is relentlessly energizing, a denial of the cold, rain (or lack of it), wind, or general dullness of the season. Here in my Calistoga garden, the first is always the lovely selection called Ceanothus 'Berkeley Skies', a seedling that appeared in the UC Botanical Garden (UCBG) in Berkeley back in the 80's. I have always assumed its parentage was most likely a hybrid between big-pod ceanothus (*C. megacarpus*) a very early white flowering species from Southern California, and glory



bush (*C. gloriosus*), a later blue-lilac flowering species of Northern California. Whatever its true parentage may be, it is a beauty, with very early pale lilac-blue flowers with a deeper black center on a large, vase-shaped shrub with small oval or teardrop shaped leathery leaves, often with minute teeth on the margins. Given its purported parentage, it can likely become a small tree to 15', but most ceanothus are of limited longevity, and 10 to 15 years would be its expected life span, though twice that would not be surprising.



Ceanothus 'Berkeley Skies' showing close to true soft-lilac coloration and deep purple-black center in this close up. The color shows up very well in cloudy or rainy weather. I know of UCBG at Berkeley propagating this shrub for its plant sales, and Cal Flora Nursery of Fulton, CA run by Sherrie Althouse and Phil Van Soelen.

First flower scape of Muscari macrocarpum, mid January; note second scape emerging on right. Another winner in my garden is a lovely bulb from Greece and SW Turkey currently called Muscari macrocapum 'Golden Fragrance'. I'm not sure if the cultivar name, 'Golden Fragrance', is any different than the species and I suspect it is just to give the catalogue descriptions more "sex appeal", but regardless it is now one of my favorite bulbs in the garden. I first saw it about 10 years ago when it was quite rare in the nursery trade, and assumed at the time that it must be very hard to grow, but I was mistaken. I grew it in my Berkeley CA garden, then in our Sebastopol, CA garden, and now in our Calistoga garden, but it is only here that I've used it in mass – as the price of bulbs came down significantly in recent years. It is a winter bulb in our climate, starting to show foliage in December and flowering in mid-January, and will continue at least into late March. It loves our summer-dry climate, but also does well in beds with routine water. In fact it has come up in every spot I've planted it from sun to light shade (deciduous and evergreen trees), rock, gravel, garden soil, clay. It has pushed up through 6" of compact mulch, dense grassy meadows, or open soils. And, unlike so many other bulbs that we waste our money on, it comes back dependably, increasing slowly, and each division flowers (unlike many Muscari that multiply excessively but produce mostly foliage). It produces large, puffy and ruffled triangular seed capsules

(macrocarpum or big pod) that can be of visual interest in and of themselves, but so far none of these have germinated spontaneously. The foliage is also large compared to many Muscari and is a pleasant grayish color.

Muscari macrocarpum in mid-February with second set of flowering scapes.

Another sequence will follow into March. Sometimes called the yellow flowered muscari or grape-hyacinth, it is actually a complex color, starting off a dull bluish purple and then quickly changing to a chartreuse-yellow in primary flower. In some light the greenish cast becomes apparent, but in full sun mostly yellow comes through. It reminds me of some of the S. African Lachenalias in coloration. While noticeable, it is more subtle than many bulbs, but is lovely in detail. But its biggest plus – and I would grow it even if the flowers were 1/10th the size or brown – is its intense sweet fragrance. I’ve planted drifts throughout the garden (as mentioned in nearly every spot I could think of) as wafts of the fragrance fill the winter air on still days and even days of mild breezes. You loose track of the number of times you stop whatever you are doing to say to yourself, “What a lovely fragrance!” You don’t even have to be near the plants, the fragrance just drifts around. Unlike paper-white Narcissus, it has none of the chemical smell that makes some folks gag. The fragrance is clean and sweet, reminding me of Daphne or hyacinth, potent yet pleasant. And the flowers appear in a sequence over many weeks, so it’s not one of those one-shot wonders like tulips. For me, the first flowers appeared in mid-January and there are new flowering scapes in flower now near mid-March. The flowers held up excellently both in our dry January and our rainy February. And the flowers do not wilt if picked as an entire stem, even left out of water. But its ease of culture, persistence, mid-winter flowering, and incredible fragrance make it a winner for me.



It has also done extremely well in containers, tolerating summer dryness (just stacked up) and has come back better each season. Definite a four star marvel for our area. The bulb is available from almost all the bulb companies.

Muscari macrocarpum coming up under a grove of foothill pine (*Pinus sabinian*), a most inhospitable spot for most plants.

