

Hardy Fuchsias

By Kathy Wolfe
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Garden work horses perform well in the Pacific NW climate

Such a floral paradise we live in! From the first sunny yellow blast of February's daffodils through the dazzling swatches of colorful April tulips, we move into May's explosion of azaleas, rhododendron, lilacs, lilies, peonies and more. All the while our senses are captured by these lovelies, another star contender is waiting in the wings for its time on center stage.

Fuchsias are outstanding not only for their continuous summer display of dainty, dancing blossoms, which attract butterflies and hummingbirds, but for their ability to perform well in maritime climate conditions here in the Pacific Northwest. There are thousands of cultivars and about 110 species found in the wild in Central and South America. Fuchsias can be purchased at reasonable prices, are easy care and offer great versatility for many garden needs, e.g., hanging baskets, container accents, bush plantings in the landscape and potted standards (think "fuchsia on a stick"). What other plant offers such long lasting, no-fuss, bountiful, eye-catching appeal?

The most commonly grown fuchsias are "tender" hybrids which tolerate USDA Hardiness Zone 9 and warmer and are used as an annual in hanging baskets and containers. There are also "hardy" and "semi-hardy" fuchsias which survive winters in USDA Hardiness Zones 6 and warmer, perfect for our regional climate. These hardy fuchsia types will be the focus of today's article.

Hardy fuchsias (*Fuchsia magellanica*) are cultivated as deciduous shrubs that grow 3'-10' tall with a similar spread. All fuchsias are classified either as single (having four petals); semi-double (having five to seven petals); or double (having eight or more petals).

All types contain an outer tube which ends in a swept back sepal of the flower (called a calyx), the inner bell petals (called the corolla), the inner stamens and protruding pistil. Plants are generally listed by their name, hardiness, color of the sepal, color of the corolla and average height. Many of their names are memorable, e.g., "Angel's Earrings Cascading," "Army Nurse," "Bashful," "Come Dancing," "Prosperity," and "Checkered Lady."

Planting hardy fuchsias is easy if you know a few tricks. Although they can be planted most times of the year, it is best to get them in the ground in late April or early May to afford time for their roots to take hold during the summer months before winter hibernation. Take your time to find a location with plenty of bright, mostly indirect sunlight, in well-drained soil with a pH of around 6. Older fuchsias seldom move well so get it right the first time. Dig the soil thoroughly and add plenty of humus-forming material. Sprinkle in a light dressing of organic fertilizer or bone meal over the excavated hole and gently fork it in. Position your plant at a depth that allows the crown to sit 4"- 6" beneath the soil. This has the benefits of protecting the roots from severe frost and allowing more root growth to nourish the plant. Replace the soil and label the variety. Water in thoroughly.



Fuchsias are nature's feeders for hummingbirds and butterflies and yield a continuous summer display of blooms. These garden workhorses have a long flowering season and little need for care. *Photo by Christine Kitch / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

Fuchsias are heavy feeders and benefit from a monthly application of a complete, balanced water soluble fertilizer (20-20-20) when the plant is actively growing and flowering. Alternatively, a granular, slow release fertilizer sprinkled around the shrub and watered in can be substituted but used less frequently and in accordance with package directions. Water when the soil 1" below the surface feels dry. For a bushier, compact plant with more blooms, pinch off the tips of growing fuchsia branches in late April or early May. Stop pinching once flower buds begin to develop. Cut off faded flowers to encourage more blooming and keep the fuchsia from devoting energy to seed production.

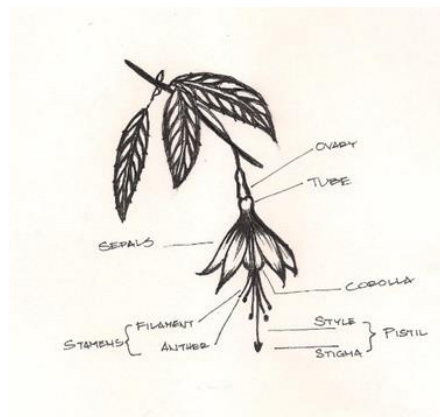
It is advantageous to keep branches intact during the winter months to prevent disease entering from exposed cuts and to add some extra winter plant protection. The branches make a good habitat for over-wintering birds, as well.



Photo by Christine Kitch / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.

A layer of well-rotted compost can be added for extra protection but remove this to outside of the plant drip-line in the spring. Prune in spring when all danger of frost is past and new shoots appear.

Hardy fuchsia may appear to be delicate, dancing ornaments but they are true garden work horses with a long flowering season and little need for care. Can you see some “Prosperity” in your future?



Hardy Fuchsias – Botanical drawing by Bryn Kremling

Propagate your own plants

Propagation through cuttings can be done most times of the year, but is best done in the spring when plant growth is thriving.

Using a healthy plant, find a growing tip with at least two pairs of leaves.

Remove the stem just above the third set of leaves. Ideally, your stem will be 2-3 inches long.

Remove excess leaves and stems using a clean cut to expose the growing region on the leaf nodes (the knobby part).

You can dip the stem in root hormone, but it is not necessary. Plant the stem into light potting soil, water in, and label.

Place the pot on a window sill or in a greenhouse. Some gardeners put a plastic bag over the cutting to provide a moist, humid microclimate, or they mist with a hand-pump sprayer in the first few days if the cutting begins to wilt.

Before long, your new fuchsia plant will be setting roots into the soil and growing tall.

■ Kathy Wolfe,
Master Gardener



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1. Master Gardener Diane Erickson first selects a growing tip of a healthy plant with a stem 2-3 inches long and three sets of leaves.

2. Excess leaves and stems are cleanly clipped off.

3. The leaf nodes, from which the roots will form, are now exposed and ready for planting.

4. Stems are set into light potting soil, watered, labeled and placed in a bright spot to root.

Photos by Trish Varrelman
Skagit County Master Gardeners

RESOURCES:

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- “Growing Winter Hardy Fuchsias in the Pacific Northwest.” Northwest Fuchsia Society. 2013 – 2014.