

PLANNING THE SPRING FLOWERING BEDS

by Molly Barker, Former Director of Education at Filoli

In April, when the formal flower beds are at their peak, the garden at Filoli is a profusion of color, fragrance and texture. Few of our guests realize that the beds are planted “from scratch” and that the planning process continues virtually year round. The formal beds (or parterres) are replanted twice a year, once in early fall for the spring display and again in late spring for the summer display.

As in every year, last year’s displays were evaluated on many levels in order to plan this year’s beds. Each bed was evaluated for overall effectiveness, timing of bloom, plant heights, color combinations and durability of display. Ideas for improvements and adjustments in timing for important events, such as the Flower Show, were considered. Extensive notes were taken regarding which bulbs were blooming at the same time as various woody plants (flowering cherries, viburnums, wisteria, etc.) and how these coordinated with the violas, wallflowers and other bedding plants. As usual, the draft for the spring design was handed over to the greenhouse staff in late April. The plan was quickly perused for plant materials that might require immediate action, such as collecting seed from the current display or acquiring seeds that would be difficult to come by or which would take a long time to grow.

Collecting Seed

Viola ‘Jersey Jem’ and *Aquilegia* ‘Filoli Soft Blue and White’ are two examples of seeds collected from the 1999 spring display which were sown for the Spring 2000 beds. ‘Jersey Jem’, a Filoli strain developed from the heirloom *Viola* ‘Jersey Gem’, is a lovely, small flowered purple/blue viola that is tough and reliable. It consistently has grown well for us at Filoli, enduring the various combinations of wet/dry/cold/warm weather that we have during the winter. It often provides vivid color in early March when many other beds seem asleep, or at least groggy.

Aquilegia (columbine) is a perennial which comes in many interesting color combinations. Germination of this plant is much better with fresh seed, but buying fresh seed in July when columbine must be sown is difficult. Also, seed of some of the hand pollinated columbine hybrids can be very expensive. Fortunately, it is possible to collect reliable seed from some varieties of columbines. This gives us access to beautiful plants fitting our color schemes at less cost.

While collecting seed from each year’s displays has many advantages, a problem that we often face while waiting for seeds to ripen is that the plants are no longer of display quality. To solve this dilemma, we transplant plants from the flower beds and continue to grow them in containers out of public view in the greenhouse area. All other seeds for the display are ordered. This includes new and experimental varieties to provide a fresh look or fill a specific niche in the design. All the bulbs for the beds and display pots are ordered fresh each year.

Scheduling and Timing

Before sowing begins in earnest, a sowing and planting schedule must be done. A good schedule is important because it takes approximately six weeks to plant the formal beds and planting must be coordinated with routine garden maintenance. Deciding which beds are going to be planted first, middle and last is based on a number of factors. For example, most beds are planted with both tulips and bedding plants, but some only have bedding plants. Also, bulbs never arrive before October 15, so we schedule the beds without bulbs to be planted between late September to mid-October and the beds with tulips are planted once the bulbs arrive.

Another consideration for scheduling the planting is knowing which summer beds will last the longest and which will deteriorate earliest. The goal is to have the best display possible at the end of the season. For example, *Petunias* often succumb to *Botrytis* or bud worms by late August while *Phlox* may grow happily into fall. Consequently, we schedule to pull and replant the *Petunia* beds before the *Phlox* beds.

Additional factors are also taken into consideration in scheduling. The growing of the plants is obviously crucial to the success of the plan and includes aspects such as temperature control, transplanting, watering, fertilizing, pest control, pinching and acclimatization of the young plants. Real life can (and will) intervene at any time so often adjustments are made to both the planting schedule and design. Seed availability, unanticipated events (e.g., movie shoots), delays in bulb deliveries, crop failures, experimental plants that prove to be unusable and early/heavy rains all can cause readjustments to the schedule.

Planting is done as a team effort with gardeners moving through the beds, preparing the soil, planting the tulips and over planting them with the bedding plants. We try very hard to get all the plants in the ground before the second week in November when preparations for Christmas at Filoli are running full steam ahead. If we don't succeed in finishing the planting that quickly, we just persevere until it is done.

The Spring 2007 display is the fruit of the labor of many hands, in many different, highly coordinated ways. Now is the time to enjoy results of this past work, and for some, it is time to dream ahead to next year's display.