A DREAM COME TRUE

A sunny warm place to visit, good food, new friends, fuchsia talk for 5 days…….sounds great….just what dreams are about. Too good to be true? Well it was reality ~ from September 9-13, 2004 at the American Fuchsia Society Convention held in San Francisco. The following is a description of the speakers and tours at this gathering.

Did you know the first fuchsia society in the world was the American Fuchsia Society which began in 1929 and is still going strong 75 years later? I learned this from Salli Dahl who gave a most informative talk on the history of the fuchsia in America. The Northwest Fuchsia Lore Collectors Club followed with information on glass etchings and engravings, silver and silver plating, and of course cup and saucers and china. Each speaker had examples for us to examine.

If you were to be a speaker at an international convention, what would be your worst nightmare? How about having your presentation that took months to assemble, disappear a few hours before you were to speak? Well, that happened to Paul Fisher and Gwen Clare from Wales. After staying up into the wee hours of the night, phoning back to staff in Wales, Paul tried to download the computer file. It did not work, but Gwen and Paul still managed to present us with an interesting and humourous talk on Wales. We just had to savour the fuchsias in our imagination rather than with his photos…..ahhh, next time.

Have you seen a TV special on Gnome Man’s Land? The creator of this garden is Jean Fenstermaker who gave a slide show and comical narrative on Gnome Man’s Land. She has 503 gnomes in various scenes throughout her garden. For the past 28 years she has collected her gnomes and various plants to make thematic garden rooms. Every winter she and her husband lovingly put the gnomes to rest for the season. Every 3 years each gnome is repainted so they are always in fine condition.

The last speaker was Mary Cooke who gave a most interesting talk on hybridizing fuchsias. This was an excellent step by step receipe for the layman. Mary had many of her hybridized plants placed in the convention hall for us to admire. At the bloom table one section contained blooms from her plants. An amazing lady!

All participants at conventions love tours. I think we all enjoy hearing about fuchsias but we want to actually see them growing in different environments and how they differ or are similar to our own plants. So let me tell you what my eyes saw.

At the San Francisco Botanical Gardens we went to the Strybing Arboretum to see fuchsia species, mostly from Chile. Dr Peter Baye was present and told us about fuchsia gall mite that is decimating many fuchsias in the San Francisco area. Research is being conducted at the Strybing Arboretum to find our more about this dreadful pest. Lucky for us Canadians, we don’t have this pest, or at least not yet. We moved onto the newly restored San Francisco Conservatory of Flowers. Here we saw many tropical plants. I was fascinated with the misting rooms, simulating jungle environments. Beside beautiful orchids I was particularly taken by 2 plants. Firstly, the large carnivorous water pitcher
plants growing in hanging baskets and secondly the giant amazon water lilies that have leaves growing up to 8 feet across with flowers ranging from 10 to 18 inches across. Now that is a some water lily!!!.

The following day we took a bus ride to Bonfante Gardens in Gilroy (the garlic capital of the USA). The Bonfante gardens are the home of the circus trees. Circus trees you say ~ What’s that all about? Let me quote from the “Guide to the Circus Trees” brochure given out by the Bonfante Gardens. I quote….”The circus trees were originally grown and created by Axel Erlandson, son of a Swedish immigrant. Inspired by observing a natural graft between 2 sycamore trees, Erlandson began to shape trees using intricate techniques. His techniques resulted in woven wonders made from living wood. The branches were carefully bent rather than cut and became complex and compound designs.”

Large trees had all unique tree trunk designs. There was a zig-zag one that looked like a lightning bolt, one that had 4 legs but 1 stem, and 6 trees that were “woven” together to look like one basket. You could not tell where each tree started or ended, they were so intertwined. I think you can tell from these descriptions that it was fascinating to note how trunks of plants could be manipulated to form designs.

Altogether the tour organizers arranged for us to visit 4 home gardens, each unique but all very beautiful and special.

What would a visit to San Francisco be without a side trip to the wine country? A visit to the Obester Winery gave us the experience of tasting wines with flowers in the wineglass. Add a nasturtium or a fuchsia to your glass and see how appealing that glass of wine becomes.

We visited 2 nurseries. One was the Half Moon Bay Nursery ~ a nursery that had a large inventory of indoor and outdoor plants, fuchsias, plus interesting pots, containers, and ornaments.

The other nursery was the world famous Antonelli’s Begonia Gardens. This was the “ultimate” for me. When I entered the nursery I was overcome with sensory overload. The ceiling is loaded, I mean groaning with hanging baskets containing the most beautiful large flowered tuberous begonias I’ve ever seen. Strolling down the aisles I was overwhelmed with the numbers, variations in colour, and different forms of flowers. As you walk further and further into the greenhouses you see “rooms” of colours, oranges, yellows, reds, pale pinks. Marvelous doesn’t describe the picture. On the other side of the nursery are gorgeous fuchsia trees, bushes, and baskets of all different varieties. So many varieties and colourful blooms ranging from tiny to very large. Throughout the greenhouses are hummingbirds flitting and buzzing by. When they rest you can get close to really admire their beauty.

The 3 hours spent at this nursery savouring the atmosphere and admiring the beauty surrounding us was such a treat. A truly memorable way to conclude a wonderful few days.

From my musings I hope you are able to sense why this was such a positive happy experience for me. Yes, it passed so quickly, just like a happy dream.