

# PLANT OF THE WEEK

September 11, 2009

## Four O'Clock *Mirabilis jalapa*

We are going to have a big weekend of events starting tomorrow at around eight thirty AM. Tomorrow, Saturday Sept. 12, as part of the Tour des Farms sponsored by the New Haven Folk Festival, we will be offering tours of our modest facility at that ungodly hour. This event is a traveling circus of bicycle riders who will visit gardens in the New Haven area, starting with us. See [www.ctfolk.com/ctff/index.html](http://www.ctfolk.com/ctff/index.html), and click on Tour des Farms.

On Sunday September 13, starting at ten here at Marsh Gardens (or at the other end in Cheshire), we will be hosting a tour of private gardens including some several local nurseries and specialty garden centers. For more information, feel free to call me at 203-915-8158.

Four O'Clocks are one annual that keeps on blooming, right up to a killing frost. It is a tender perennial, native to the Peruvian Andes. One of the first botanical oddities brought out of the New World, its Latin genus name means 'wonderful,' and the species name refers to a town in Mexico. I'm not sure why the Mexican town name got in there, but I like it. Say the 'j' like an 'h' and you will have the pronunciation down pat. It is a member of its own family, with the unfortunate name Nyctaginaceae. The family has around thirty genera and almost three hundred species within its folds, including many from tropical areas world-wide and a few from temperate areas.

I start Four O'Clocks from seed every spring. You can also buy the root at garden centers, but I prefer the seed. The variety 'Broken Colors' is a named variety that exhibits one of the most amazing attributes of the plant. In the same flower, there will be numerous colors present, and not arranged as some flowers with petals, anthers and sepals all colored the same. The petals (actually they are pigmented sections of the calyx), as shown in the photo below have multi-colored sections that cut across the flower units. As well, manyflowers on the same plant are of different colors one from another.

Linnaeus used Four O'Clocks to help illustrate the botanical clock. This flower begins flowering late in the afternoon (hence their common name), and continues well into the night. The delicious sweet fragrance is very evocative and draws moths and late-afternoon hummingbirds. In the wild, a long-tongued moth of the order Sphingidae pollinates the flowers.

It is a bit rangy (my lovely bride thinks it is a bit too much so for the entry garden, but I put up with its slovenly late summer form because of the welcoming fragrance that

meets visitors to the Casa di Larsoni), about two feet high by two or three feet wide. You can, of course, stake it and make it more presentable, but I can't help but remember its nativity, and so let it alone like the Spanish should have let the Incas alone. But that's neither here nor there.

A good hard frost will put paid to this plant in the fall, living through light frosts. But it is NOT even remotely frost hardy as a young seedling, so start them in pots indoors in April, planting out in May after all danger of frost. They like an average well-drained garden soil, with average fertility, and full sun to partial shade. Plant them with a low-growing edging plant to hide the bottom six inches, and enjoy the intoxicating fragrance from July into October.

The flowers are used in food coloring mostly for cakes and jellies. Although the leaves are edible when cooked, I wouldn't recommend them. Medicinally, parts of the plant are used as a diuretic, a purgative and for healing wounds. The root is thought to be an aphrodisiac, and the seeds are used as a cosmetic and a dye. As always, take any of this with a grain of salt and don't use any parts of any plant unless you have the instructions of an herbalist.

Thanks and have a great weekend.  
Your friend,  
Eric



*Notice the 'Broken Color' arrangement on this Four O'Clock blossom. Treated as an annual, they will reseed themselves if they are happy.*

Liquid Sunshine and Plant of the Week are written for e-mail readers on average of once a week. The opinions and views expressed herein are the sole responsibility of the author. Yale University and Marsh Botanical Garden are not responsible for the inane and sometimes off the chart craziness of this publication. Contact us at: [eric.larson@yale.edu](mailto:eric.larson@yale.edu) or at (203) 432-6320.