

# Hardy Fuchsias

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## The workhorses of the garden

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 to care for 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 4'-10' tall with a similar spread to its height. 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 it 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 Farrow / WSU Skagit County Extension 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 feels dry 1" below the surface. 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. A layer of well-rotted compost can be added for extra protection but should be removed to outside of the plant drip-line in the spring. Prune in spring when all danger of frost is past and new shoots appear.



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” 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 it, and label. Place the pot on a windowsill 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.

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



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### **RESOURCES:**

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