

Grandpa Ott's Fabulous Flowers

By Julie Silva

The debate quietly raged on. "It is a weed," the master gardener whispered to me. I replied the flowers are beautiful. "They spread everywhere" the voice calmly declares. I said again, they are beautiful, even magnificent. I need them and people need to know about them. Then she sighed.

If you know Grandpa Ott's morning glories, then you know they are beautiful. Deep purple flowers with white to magenta red centers that open every morning. The flowers appear like magic surrounded by elegant heart shaped leaves. While they will grow up any climbable surface, including themselves, they are annuals and not heavy enough to pull down a fence like many vines.

Grandpa Ott's morning glories became a commercial success by the power of one family. Grandpa Ott's grand daughter, Diane Ott Whealy shared the memories of warm summer days with the family enjoying their porch shaded by the family's morning glories. The seeds for the family's prized vines were brought to America by Diane's great-grandparents when they sailed across the Atlantic from Bavaria. Her grandfather, Grandpa Ott, nurtured the plants and taught Diane to save the seeds. Grandpa Ott saved seeds, only sharing with family, friends, and people that admired the vines. In 1974 when Grandpa Ott passed on, Diane and her husband Ken were the only people in possession of his seeds. Grandpa Ott had guided his granddaughter, giving her his passion for seed saving. Diane and Ken are the founders of the Seed Savers Exchange. Their efforts have made Grandpa Ott's morning glories an heirloom favorite for many gardeners and seed companies.

Morning glories are easy to grow and even easier to enjoy. There are a few requirements that they like, such as full sun. To have several seasons' worth of blooms, it helps to have good drainage and amended soil. Easy on the fertilizer or you will have more plant than flowers. If planted in early spring after the last frost your plants should thrive until the first winter frost.

The easiest way to plant them is by seed. To achieve quick germination, use a nail file to file down a spot on the hard exterior, and then soak the seeds in warm water overnight. Plant your seeds as per the package instructions at ½ inch depth, keeping the soil moist for both the seeds and the seedlings. The plants should germinate in 15 to 21 days.

Morning glories love to climb. Arches, fences, trellises, poles, mailboxes, and other plants (including your tomato plants, she sighed) become a morning glory's stairway to heaven. It is best to look at your planting site and envision the vines using your neighbor's Italian cypress as a step stool. It would be beautiful with those flowers popping out behind that foliage but the neighbor might not be as beautiful when he spots it. Two things, different varieties vine at

different lengths with Grandpa Ott's at about 10 to 12 feet. Secondly, if you don't like them in that spot they are easy to pull out. Small root systems just slide right out of moist soil.

There is an old walnut tree on Albers Road outside of Hughson that is covered with light blue-colored morning glories. It is a sight to behold. Patriotic displays are easy to achieve using red, white, and blue morning glories planted together. Awesome for any holiday.

So the colors and the textures will be appealing to all, including your neighborhood pollinators. Hummingbirds and butterflies will seek out your landscape for the pollen and the nectar. If you want to be known as a Pollinator Protector, Grandpa Ott's will bring beneficials and pollinators by the droves to your landscape.

To my dear friend who warned us all about the dangers of Grandpa Ott's, I say, "You are right." They do reseed (for years to come, she sighed), they do grow over the fence to the neighbor's, and they are tough. I would not give up a minute of the sun shining through those dark purple flowers. So, we have been warned.

Julie Silva is a University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener of Tuolumne County, who loves her Grandpa Ott's morning glories.

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