

This backyard gardener is a true connoisseur of plants



By [Joshua Siskin](#) | perfectplants18@yahoo.com |

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I don't think there is anyone who appreciates plants more than Loren Zeldin. In clandestine corners of his garden you suddenly come upon the most brilliant, yet ephemeral, flowering plants — miniature polyanthus primroses, florists' cineraria, and lisianthus or prairie gentian, for example. Although Zeldin knows they will live for no more than a few months in Reseda, where his half-acre backyard garden is located, he insists on planting them anyway.

Or take fuchsias, known commonly as lady's eardrops, that live for many years when the climate is right but are ill-suited to San Fernando Valley heat. Zeldin has planted numerous fuchsias over the years knowing full well that they will be dead before July is over. Kangaroo paw (*Anigozanthus* spp.) is another plant that persistently fails in Zeldin's garden after a few years of life but now he has just defiantly planted another fresh batch of them.

Zeldin is what you call a plant connoisseur. A wine connoisseur will spend dearly for a bottle that will be opened and drained over a single dinner with friends. Those who have a similar appreciation for plants may likewise spend freely when it comes to garden gems and — like

those who enjoy sharing a good wine — are especially happy when in the company of others with whom they can share, at least visually, their short-lived treasures.

So Zeldin is in a bit of a funk these days since he regularly hosts spring tours of his garden that, due to the coronavirus, have been canceled this year. Still, at least I got a chance to visit, even if we were both wearing masks for the occasion.

Now in his late sixties, Zeldin has spent his entire life in a dwelling which is located near Tampa Avenue and Roscoe Boulevard. As you stroll through the garden, you are shown 40-year-old specimens such as the fragrant Belle of Portugal tea rose, a 20-foot-tall arching beauty that was started from a cutting 40 years ago, a ponytail palm (*Beaucarnea recurvata*) that was planted from a 4-inch pot at about the same time and whose trunk now bulges out to four feet across at its base, and a *Hylocereus* or dragon fruit vine, also started from a cutting, that has clambered 50 feet up the trunk of a silk oak (*Grevillea robusta*) tree.

Enjoying the shade of that same silk oak and some adjacent palm trees is the most enormous Japanese maple (*Acer palmatum*) I have ever seen in a San Fernando Valley garden. It is a magnificent specimen that is more than 20 feet tall with a canopy diameter of matching size. This Japanese maple is living proof that the tree will grow to its full potential even where summers sizzle as long as the sun it receives is of the filtered variety.

According to Zeldin, you can propagate antique rose varieties such as Belle of Portugal (a hybrid tea produced at the Lisbon Botanic Garden in 1903) from cuttings and the cloned offspring will be as robust as the original. The cuttings of more modern hybrids, however, will probably not grow into specimens as strong as the mother plants from which they came; stem cuttings of these hybrids need to be grafted onto specific rootstock types in order to perform as advertised.

Zeldin's insistence on planting what most people don't can pay handsome dividends. He has a *Weigela* cv. *Variegata* for instance; *variegata* refers to its leaves that have creamy white margins. This is not the first *weigela* (why-GEE-la) that Zeldin has planted and the others did not do well, but his persistence has been rewarded this spring with abundant blooms.

A plant I would put in the *Weigela* category in terms of its rare appearance in local gardens is *Spiraea* (spy-REE-uh). Zeldin's garden features two types, both with white miniature rose-like flowers and one of which is a stunning compact beauty reaching only three feet tall. Both *Weigela* and *Spiraea* are cold tolerant and handle freezes and even snow without complaint.

Zeldin has two vining *Thunbergias*: a rare rose pink black-eyed Susan (*Thunbergia alata*), a species most often seen in orange or yellow and the seldom-seen sky flower (*Thunbergia grandiflora*) with three-inch flared mauve-blue blooms.

Zeldin's appreciation of variegation is expressed in several of his rose varieties, generically known as striped roses, in which red, white, and pink intermingle. Fourth of July, with a spicy apple fragrance, is one of them. It was bred as a climbing rose and reaches a height of 14 feet with an eight-foot spread but may also be raised as a free-standing shrub, which Zeldin has done.

Zeldin takes special pride in his roses and irises and has been a member of the San Fernando Valley Rose Society and Iris Society for many years. Two tall bearded irises in his expansive collection worth special adulation are the brilliant white Wings of a Dove and the maroon Ida Red.

As we stroll through the garden, Zeldin points to invasive ornamentals which he refers to as “garden thugs.” Although each is attractive in its own right, when allowed to proliferate they can strangle other species in their vicinity. One of these is Peruvian lily (*Alstroemeria*), whose long-lasting clusters of trumpet blooms persist for two weeks when placed in vase arrangements.

The invasive *Alstroemeria* varieties are pink or fuchsia but there are non-invasive varieties in red, yellow, orange, and purple as well as decorous dwarf varieties that definitely know their place. Borage (*Borago officinalis*) is a uniquely charming thug. Its blue flowers nod humbly, while its stems and buds are covered with an endearing fuzz. Blue larkspur or annual delphinium (*Consolida ajacis*) is a self-sowing annual and English garden favorite with long flower spikes in blue, violet, white or pink and delicate ferny foliage yet it too can swallow up portions of the garden when allowed to run rampant.

Zeldin has high praise for California Nurseries where some of his more recent acquisitions have been made at extremely reasonable prices. You can find their plants at two locations: 18955 Roscoe Boulevard in Northridge and 14301 Van Nuys Boulevard in Arleta.

Tip of the Week: Zeldin’s butcher’s broom (*Ruscus aculeatus*) is an unusual shade-loving species with stiff, lanceolate, dark emerald foliage that is perfect as greenery filler for bouquets and vase arrangements. At this moment it is showing off cherry red marble-sized fruit. Please email photos or comments regarding any other shade-lover(s) you would like to share with readers of this column.

Please send questions, comments, and photos to Joshua@perfectplants.com.