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Fruitful and Multiplying Frederick the Passion Fruit Vine

by Randy Arnowitz

I have three pets—or, rather, family members. One is my extremely mellow golden retriever, Peaches. She is still relatively young but even when she was a pup she was so sedate that I could hardly detect a pulse.

I also have an enthusiastic parrotlet named Dibblee that, although weighing in at a whopping 37 grams (when he's having a fat day), is much more demanding and requires substantially more attention than Peaches.

The third member of my eclectic family is Frederick. In the short time that I've had him I've seen him grow from a mere toddler of a sprout into a vigorous emerald green giant who, last time I checked, was at least 60 feet long. He spends his days lazing in the sun, draped over a wooden fence in the abandoned pasture behind my house.

Frederick, or rather *Passiflora edulis* "Frederick," is a passion fruit vine that I planted out from a five-gallon container a little over two years ago. Last summer, which was his second season of bearing fruit, he produced many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of fragrant, purple fruits—many of them almost the size of billiard balls. I had so much fruit, in fact, that I boxed up and mailed some of the excess bounty to lucky friends in Boston, Tucson and Iowa.

The flowers of this South American native are as extraordinary as those on the other passifloras: They are bizarre and otherworldly and the individual flower parts are said to represent elements of the passion of Christ. In my garden Frederick bears his two- to three-inch white flowers with a purple and white crown from early spring into early winter.



WENDY ROBERTS

The round or ovoid fruit, one and a half to three inches wide, has a tough, smooth and waxy rind that is dark purple when fully ripe. The inside is filled with an aromatic mass of membranous sacs containing orange-colored, pulpy juice and as many as 250 crunchy, hard, edible, black seeds. The flavor is appealing, musky, guava-like and sweetly tart. Once you've gotten past the somewhat suspect gelatinous texture you'll agree that there is nothing else quite like it.

I enjoy them by cutting them in half and eating them directly from their papery shell or mixing them into my plain yogurt. Also good in salad dressings, in or on ice cream and in smoothies, passion fruit are said to be high in antioxidants and to possess cancer-preventing properties.

The best time to plant a passion vine is in early spring when the nighttime temperatures begin to warm. I've learned that for such an enthusiastic and rampant grower this plant's root system is somewhat shallow-growing and not very extensive. For this reason they are exceptionally vulnerable and unforgiving of root damage from, say, marauding gophers or moles. As a precaution, I planted mine in a Houdini-proof wire basket made of quarter inch hardware cloth. I also fashioned a six-inch-tall wire collar around the bottom stems to dissuade pesky rabbits and other above-ground varmints from tasting them.

Considering the vigor of this handsome vine, to say nothing of its generosity, this plant is relatively easy to grow. For optimum flowering and fruiting it requires full sun for most of the day. With less light you're likely to get an abundance of foliage but little or no flowers or fruit.

The soil in my garden is heavy clay so even during the hottest part of summer I only irrigate once a week—thoroughly and slowly allowing the water to fully saturate the soil. As the cooler season approaches I allow the soil to dry slightly between waterings, as these plants are extremely susceptible to soil-borne diseases when kept too soggy. Naturally, in sandy, well-draining soil more frequent irrigation may be needed during the warmer months and especially when the Santa Anas blow through.

When it is actively growing I feed my vine often with whatever I have around the potting shed. Apart from keeping a thick blanket of homemade compost around the base of the vine

I regularly drench with fish emulsion, compost tea or sprinkle some other type of organic, granular fertilizer within the root zone.

To produce large, quality fruits and to keep them from overtaking your entire house and garden, passion vines benefit from a harsh annual pruning. Last spring my goal was to cut back to a basic framework but was thwarted when I discovered underneath the dense, top layer of shiny, lush foliage another crop of green fruit that had developed from the previous fall bloom. I settled for taking off that top layer of green, saved the fruit and before long was rewarded with my spring bloom.

Passion vines are not very long lived and after five years or so they can become tired, unproductive, overly woody or succumb to viruses and disease. With that in mind, last spring I took some soft and some woody cuttings of my vine to ensure that my future would be bright and full of passion fruit. I dipped them in rooting hormone before putting them into three-inch plastic pots and covered each with a plastic bag to retain humidity. I then fastened the bags around the sides of the pots with elastic bands. After a month or so atop my fridge under fluorescent lights they began to put out new leaves. As they grew, I potted them up and gradually acclimated them to



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life outdoors by planting them in the garden in full sun. They bloomed shortly afterwards and now, tendrils reaching, they are mingling with the parent and those first flowers have miraculously become fruits.

My original parent plant yielded an extremely heavy

crop starting in early summer. To harvest I wait until the fruit turns purple and drops to the ground rather than picking it from the vine—it's sweeter that way. On the hottest days I make a point of checking the area beneath the vine for fruit every morning and evening, since fruit left on the ground for even a few hours will scald.

This botanical wonder is so easy to grow in Santa Barbara that it's practically an invasive weed, yet I find myself ever passionate about the wild, jungly vines with their glossy, apple green foliage, the outlandish, exotic flowers and the generous bounty of *Passiflora edulis* "Frederick." 🍷

Randy Arnowitz is a gardener, horticulturist and writer. He particularly enjoys working with roses, orchids and sharing the day with his golden retriever, Peaches, who faithfully accompanies him in the field. He has written for the *Santa Barbara Independent*, the *Santa Barbara News-Press* and is currently a garden columnist for *Montecito Journal* and *Montecito Journal Magazine*. His work has also appeared in *Weird N.J.*