

What time is it? Why, it's time for four o'clocks!

CINDY MURRAY Special to the Daily Sun

Few people are witness to the abundance of miracles unfolding each midsummer in Coconino County — where glorious fields of sunflowers reach for azure skies, thunderheads tower to an altitude of 60,000 feet, and sun-drenched conifers infuse the air with sweet aromas, to name a few. In my mind, another of those miracles, although tiny, is the bursting forth of four o'clock blossoms.

Four o'clocks belong to the Nyctaginaceae family, the same one as sand verbenas, spiderlings, and bougainvillea. The name four o'clock is fitting, since most bloom during the waning skies of late afternoon and into the next day, synchronizing perfectly with the awakening of thirsty, long-tongued pollinators like sphinx moths. Hummingbirds, on their last forays of the evening, seek the sweet nectar deep within these trumpet-like flowers, providing them with the fuel required to tide them through their dusk-to-dawn slumber.

One peculiar characteristic of many four o'clocks is that their “flowers” may not be flowers at all. Rather, they are pigmented modified leaves called sepals, partially fused together to form a tube and then flared wide like a trumpet. This characteristic holds true for showy four o'clocks (*Mirabilis multiflora*).

Also known as the Colorado four o'clock, the showy four o'clock is positively delightful. With the onset of summer, it thrusts leathery, elongated, heart-shaped leaves aboveground. (The fact that four o'clocks die all the way to the ground each fall, leaving no trace of aboveground vegetation, makes me think this phenomenon itself is a tiny miracle.) If water is abundant, their vegetative growth is rapid, spreading up to six feet in diameter along the ground. I occasionally irrigate mine to help them along.

Right about now in midsummer, my showy four o'clocks become the focal point of our flower bed. Each morning, I make a beeline to catch sight of their magenta, one-inch inflorescences showcased through the dark hours of night. I never know when their ephemeral flowers will wither and die — perhaps early morning, perhaps a bit later. They seem to last longest on cloudy days. Showy four o'clocks are native to our area, growing naturally in sandy soils along roadsides and on mesas.

Just a few weeks ago, when my husband trimmed some lower branches from our juniper, we were pleased to find a second showy four o'clock. I've heard that untreated seeds of this species are difficult to establish, but obviously one seed, having been shed by the original plant, had germinated and is now thriving. You may find properly treated showy four o'clock seeds on the internet. Better yet, the plants themselves are occasionally available and affordable at our local nurseries. Call ahead to be sure.

A few years ago, another species, the ribbon four o'clock (*Mirabilis linearis*) made its premiere on a different sector of our property -- amongst my blooming rabbit brush! It was a pleasant surprise, seeing that I had not planted it. It is similar to the showy four o'clock, but grows up to three feet tall, with flowers sporting longer tubes. Ribbon four o'clocks grow naturally along our roadsides, and in oak and pine woodlands.

The spreading four o'clock (*Mirabilis oxybaphoides*) grows wild in moist sites along boulders and woodlands, and can often be found tangled amongst vegetation in brushy areas at 6,000 to 8,000 feet in elevation. I'm not aware of any establishment that sells these plants or seeds.

Mirabilis jalapa, a four o'clock originating from dry regions in the tropical Americas, serves as a lovely annual in many northern Arizonan landscapes. This variety holds a few tiny miracles of its own. For instance, the flowers may be of various colors on the same plant or even change color over time. They frequently display fanciful specks or stripes, as well.

Not surprisingly, *Mirabilis* is the Latin word for "amazing, wondrous, and remarkable." In my mind, however, I will always think of these miraculous ornamentals as "A Midsummer Night's Dream".

SKYWARN is a program that trains volunteers to help keep their local communities safe by providing timely and accurate reports of monsoon season weather to the National Weather Service. (Video courtesy of Flagstaff NWS)

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For more information about the Master Gardener program, visit:
<https://extension.arizona.edu/coconino-master-gardener>. The online Master Gardener class starts on August 28, 2023.