

Town Gardener Martha Washington Geranium

By TOM CAVAN
Martha My Dear

When people see a Martha Washington Geranium (Pelargonium x domesticum) for the first time they don't think of it as a geranium. This South African herb doesn't look like the zonal and bedding out geraniums we use in our sunny souther Ontario gardens.

Martha Washington or Regal Geranium have a different appearance. Their flowers range from small mass of pansy types to large azalea-like clusters and small soft leaves to coarse jagged leaves respectfully. Their flowers are mother natures own artistry with lavender, red, pink and white variations. When you look closer you'll discover a richer color accents the throat of the flower or the petals of the flower change in color from lighter to darker or vice-versa. To initiate bud and keep them flowering, evening temperatures must be cool (60 F - 15 C). Now living in Ontario, this makes Martha Washington a perfect indoor flowering geranium too!

Martha Washington Geranium must not be overfed to initiate or retain blooming. When this plant is in flower you should feed it at half recommended strength. I have found that slow release nutricote to be the best because there are no salts build-up in the soil. If your Martha Washington geranium starts to look pale this is telling you the fertilizer salts are burning and damaging the roots, much the same appearance as when a plant is over-watered and goes weak and pale from lack of air to the roots. With nutricote or any slow release fertilizer the elements are released with water and heat so no need to overwater a plant because you're trying to feed with fertilizer dissolved in the water.

Martha Washington geraniums prefer slightly acidic soil (5.5-6.5) which can easily be taken care of by freshening the soil once a year. A good time is late winter, early spring after blooming. Three to four weeks after you take cuttings the plant will show new foliage. When this plant is active it transplants with ease.

Do not control this plant's size by pinching because it will delay if not destroy it's flowering potential. When taking cuttings use a sharp knife so you don't crush the stem. Cutting size should be 4"-6" tip cuttings. The prepared cut must be just below a node then dipped in rooting hormone and placed in 50 per cent soilless mix with 50 per cent sharp sand. Water thoroughly with No Damp (fungicide). Cuttings must be maintained at 75 F for 15-20 days. Soils should be misted to retain moisture and I would recommend alternate misting with No Damp to prevent any potential disease attacks.

Martha Washington's prefer a cool sunny window and will flower profusely until warm weather prevails. During summer months if placed in a half sun position will keep flowering but leaf production is more prolific so why not take cuttings during summer months also, and fill your windows with winter color.

If you have any questions call The Town Gardener Hotline at 833-2117.

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and expert advice

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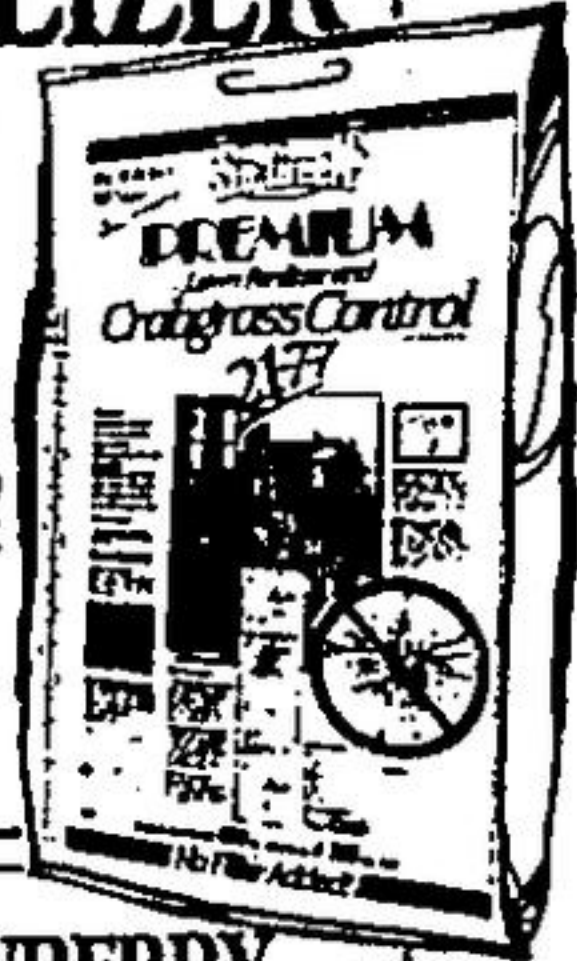
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Sandy Lidka, Cavan's Garden Gallery, Mississauga, Ont.



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The Garden Gallery is an association of independent Canadian-owned garden centres.

