

Growing Fuchsias in the Ground-**Barbara's Way** November, 2006

I have never been successful with growing anything pots. So when I started growing fuchsias I decided to try to grow them in the ground. I discovered they actually need much less care in the ground than in pots and for most of the year they only need watering twice a week. In the heatwave conditions of New Year 2005-6, I only lost 2 fuchsias out of almost 400 despite 40 degree + temperatures. In fact only about 20 were badly affected and I only watered every second day. If the fuchsias had been more established they would probably have fared better still, many of them had only been planted for a few months. I believe my planting method is what helped them, along with underground watering.

These instructions are based on central Blue Mountains conditions, you may have to adapt them to suit you area. I aim to grow healthy plants that look attractive with no reference to competition standards or the conventional way of growing fuchsias.

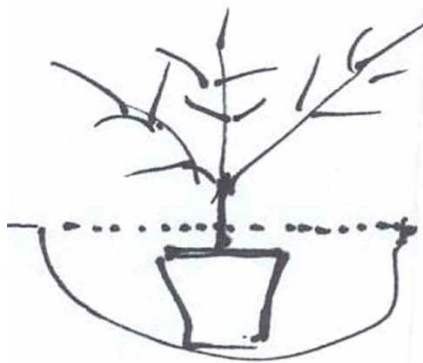
Plants can be transferred straight from 3" pots to the ground so long as they are robust and it is not extremely hot or cold, avoid planting out in mid summer and mid winter. You can plant out large fuchsias from pots at any time but again try to avoid hot or very cold weather.

Soil and Position

Fuchsias need well-drained soil preferably with a lot of organic matter in it, this can be added if necessary, they like to be moist but hate to be wet. Contrary to popular opinion fuchsias do NOT thrive in very shady positions they grow very leggy and produce fewer flowers. Ideally fuchsias need at least a few hours sun a day preferably in the morning. A perfect spot is one that gets morning sun, afternoon shade or lightly mottled shade from a tree or shade from a 50% shade cloth all day. There are some fuchsias that will grow in full sun in the central Blue Mountains check out my website (see below) for a full list. They need a lot of light to flourish. Having a light sandy soil I have to add a lot of manure and compost and have shade sails across my backyard, as there is no summer shade. I prefer this open feeling to the closed in feeling of a shade house or gazebo. I use an underground weeping irrigation system that is buried about 1 inch below the soil surface (fuchsias are shallow rooted) with our water restrictions this is still permitted and except in the hottest weather the twice a week we are allowed to use it is sufficient. For 2 weeks around New Year 2005/6 I supplement it with tank watering but only occasionally. For the first few weeks after planting new fuchsias daily watering is sometimes needed - check the soil to see if necessary before watering.

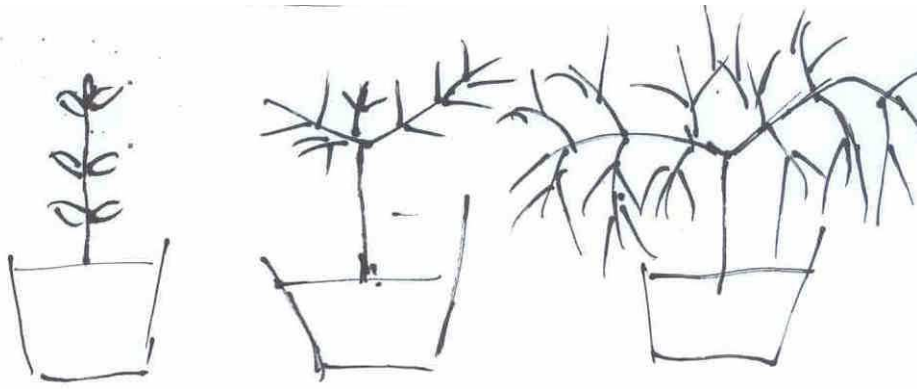
Planting fuchsias

Dig a hole at least double the width and depth of the pot you are planting if you have clay soil do not dig into the clay you will need to build up a raised bed. Put the soil in a bucket, add water crystals and Osmocote at the recommended rate. If the soil is of poor quality discard some of it and replace with well-rotted compost or manure. Carefully tease the outermost roots out then plant about 3cm lower than the soil level in the pot (see diagram).



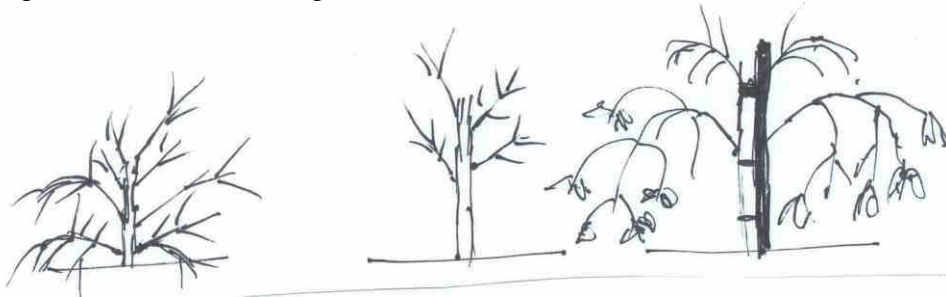
This plus the mulch will protect the fuchsia from heat and frost, many books written by well known fuchsia experts recommend this for cold areas. Fill in under and around with the soil from the bucket press down firmly making sure you don't damage the roots, handle the stem carefully especially if still soft. Cover with 3-6 cm of mulch. Water well.

For a bush fuchsia it is important that the leaves of the plant are not near or in contact with the ground, in fact they should be well clear as the flowers will be damaged as the weight of them will pull branches much lower and diseases are much more prevalent if air cannot circulate. If you are growing your own plants from cuttings or can get ones that haven't been pinched out follow the diagrams on the next page.



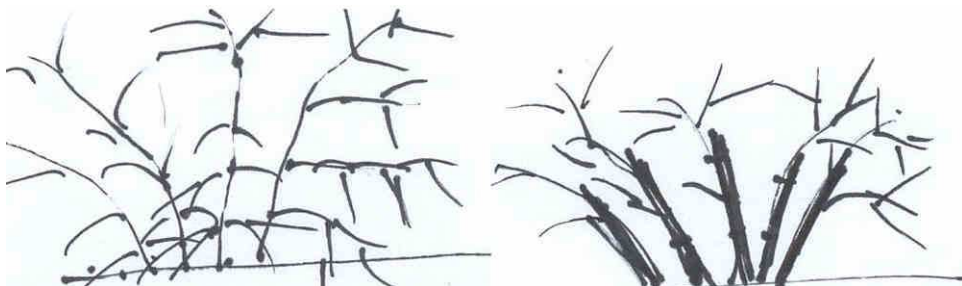
Pinch out the growing tip after 3 sets of leaves have formed, then pinch out each branch after 2 sets of leaves have formed and stake securely. Remove the 3 sets of leaves from short trunk as soon as the head has developed. As you can see from the diagram (only shows the branches) this will keep the foliage clear of the ground.

If the plant is established remove the lower leaves and branches to encourage the higher growth and so it doesn't drag in the ground. Follow the diagrams below.



As you can see this plants branches are already below the level of the pot and will on the ground when you plant it. Remove the lower 2 sets of branches if the plant has a central stem and stake firmly.

Many fuchsias particularly trailers (these can easily be grown in the ground if staked well) have multiple stems so the above method doesn't work.



Take the lower 2 sets of leaves or side shoots from each branch and stake each one with a short cane. The canes should form and inverted cone shape. These canes can often be removed after 1 or 2 years, they don't show once the plant becomes bushy

The aim in all these methods is to produce a woody skeleton that will support the large amount of foliage without bending or breaking the branches. If this skeleton is well developed with numerous branches it will only be necessary to prune back to it each year then allow to grow on pinching out in future years will be unnecessary if you do a good job in the first year. You will have to sacrifice flowers the first six months to have an excellent plant.

With all plants pinch out each branch at least 3 times (this will give 8 branches from one stem) but preferably 5 times (this will give 32 branches from one stem), this will give a bushy plant with many flowers. In our climate the plants grow quickly and large when grown in the ground so it is essential to pinch out or "stop" branches even on self-branching varieties. The stopping not only sends the energy into the side shoots but it strengthens the main branch, this is essential if you don't want bent or broken branches just when they are in full flower.

Training fuchsias

Books refer to shapes of fuchsia and set sizes. This is mainly for competitions, so I let my fuchsias "do their own thing" to a certain extent. If I decide to grow a plant as a standard and it keeps sprouting out at the base I let it and have a two-tier plant that looks great. If a bush suddenly puts out a long branch I just stake it up and let it grow into a top story. I find columns are very good in the garden as the weight is more evenly distributed on the stem.

Standards

To grow a standard you need a cutting or a small plant that hasn't been pinched out. Let the one-stemmed plant keep growing, tying it to a stake as it grows and re-potting it as soon as the roots just fill the pot. Leave on all the side leaves but remove all the side shoots. Decide how tall you want it to grow before it spreads out (between 2 and 6ft) then let it grow three more sets of leaves. Then pinch out the top shoot, allow the top 3 side shoots to develop, still remove any below this level. As each of the six side shoots grow pinch them out regularly. Each time you pinch out a stem it will grow 2 more stems, so the aim is to get at least 24 branches preferably 48 or more. The more branches the more flowers, once the head is about 8 inches in diameter remove the leaves from the main stem. If you are going to plant the standard in your garden plant it out when it is about 8 inches tall. Tie it to a stake the size you want it to grow so you don't have to keep replacing the stake. Follow the planting instructions above. Check the ties regularly and replace any that have grown too tight.

Columns

To grow a column start as for the standard but DON'T remove the side shoots, pinch out each side shoot when it grows 2-3 sets of leaves DON'T pinch out the top shoot till it reaches the height required. Try growing one 6-8 ft high they look great! Stake and fertilise as for a standard

Fertilizers

I use water-soluble fertiliser, as fuchsias are gross feeders. For the first 6-8 weeks after planting, water weekly with Nitrolsol alternated with Seasol. Then change to a complete fertiliser, I use Osmocote slow release supplemented for the next month by 2 fortnightly applications of a complete liquid fertiliser then monthly while flowering. Most fuchsias take 8-12 weeks to flower after the last pinching out. For standards or columns keep up the Nitrolsol alternated with Seasol until the top is well developed, then change to the complete fertiliser.

Pruning

Fuchsias must be pruned severely once a year with a light prune in summer to help with water loss. Where you live will govern when you prune. For 30 years I lived Woodford in the Blue Mountains, where one or two very light frosts were the norm, we had a mixed garden with a lot of azaleas. Our fuchsias flowered all year round except for 8-10 weeks after pruning, the light frost didn't often affect them. So we pruned in spring as soon as the azaleas started flowering and by the time the azaleas had finished the fuchsias were ready to bloom again, this way we had fuchsias all winter. At Lawson only 5 minutes further up the mountains we get a few more frosts and they cause minor to major damage to my fuchsias, all survive but the flowers, some or all the leaves and a few the stems are killed. So I prune in autumn at least 6 weeks before the first frosts, so the new growth is hardened off. This way we get earlier spring flowers, as we don't have the option of winter flowering after the first frost. If you don't have to worry about frost you can prune at any time, many people prune in mid-winter as flowering is much less at this time.

Fuchsias flower on new growth so once established you just remove all of the current seasons growth, cutting back to the skeleton of woody growth you have developed to support the plant. If you have let the plant grow leggy with long straggly branches cut back about 2/3rds of the plant then pinch out a few times when re-growth starts.

Propagating

The method I use is modified from information given to me in Adelaide by a member of the Australian Fuchsia Society,

The cuttings are planted in tubes in a polystyrene box, the propagating mix is 50% river sand 50% potting mix. Tip cuttings are used ensuring the leaves don't touch each other or the tubes or the box.

The cuttings are watered in, then the whole box is put in a white kitchen tidy bag, wire similar to coat hanger wire is inserted to hold the plastic off the cuttings then it is sealed thoroughly. Then left in a warm light position out of the sun for 6 weeks.

I have had a 95-100% success rate with this method. The only time I had failures was when I used a plastic box instead of polystyrene so I think that this provides insulation that keeps the temperature more stable.

I hope you find this info helpful.

Check out my website at www.nswabbeygirls.com or contact me on 02 47591170, or email bcooper1@pacific.net.au

Barbara Cooper.

Looking for fuchsias in the Blue Mountains?

Hazelbrook Public School runs a greenhouse, propagating good quality plants at inexpensive prices.

It is open every Friday during school terms from 2.30 – 3.15 pm.

**A large variety of small fuchsia plants are always available.
Entrance at rear of school in Hazelbrook Parade.**