



A PANDEMIC ADVENTURE

Queen of the Night: Springtime in the Fall

by Nancy Flanagan

In an out-of-the way corner of our garden, an old rose cane trellis hugs gangly ribbons of cactus close to a weathered fence in an attempt to confine sprawl and fend off critters that have a taste for flowers and succulent greenery. We have two varieties of orchid cactus growing there in small terracotta pots: Queen of the Night, a thornless variety with dazzling white blooms in the fall, and a variety with tiny bothersome thorns that produces magical, iridescent magenta blooms in spring. Across the sidewalk, a plain stucco wall casts nourishing sunlight in the direction of the trellis. After dark, sea winds gust along this narrow passageway, bringing moisture and the moan of distant foghorns.

One morning, I notice tiny budlets poking their heads out along the scalloped edges of the white cereus, and I pause to count them. Nine! A thrill washes over me, for a fully open, once-a-year, one-night-only Queen of the Night cereus bloom is a breathtaking sight.

Imagining the beauty to come, I check the orchid cactus daily. A couple of weeks pass, and then, for no discernable reason, seven tender buds pale and fall, one by one. Only two hang on tightly and grow to four inches of promising plumpness. The large buds point earthwards on elongating straight necks, until one day the two heads rise up on graceful S-curves. A sure sign they will open SOON!

At 2:30 a.m., a thought jolts me as my head touches the pillow: THIS may be the night! I nudge my husband, deep in dreams. "Do you want to go with me into the chilly darkness to see the debutantes' debut?" He mumbles, "Yes," slowly pushes sleep aside, and dons a robe. Flashlight, camera phone, and giddy expectation go with us as we stealthily slipper-foot down the stairs and across the yard. The motion detector senses our approach. The corner floods with light . . . YES! There they are: spectacular, and much larger than we imagined. Worth the two-year wait for the first bloom.

We missed the slow unfurling of the sisters' elegant seven-inch petal skirts a few hours after

the sun sank below the horizon, but they are more alluring after midnight anyway. They are delicate dancers, vibrating in the breeze under the crescent moon with all of their luscious beauty on display for an unseen night pollinator. Fresh white petals and pale pink sepals spread open, cradling the reason for it all: the pistil, a creamy, many-fingered open palm, stretched forward, ready and waiting to catch yellow pollen piled high, balancing perfectly on the tips of silky filaments floating all around the pistil near the center of each blossom cup. Approaching for a closer look, we detect an enticing citrusy scent. Loveliness. All that is needed is a winged passerby (here, most likely a Sphinx moth rather than a bat) to jostle the fancy parts together, and the miracle and mystery of their lives will be fulfilled.

My husband pulls out his camera phone to capture what we see. Not wanting to wake our neighbors, he uses a secretive whisper to activate the camera. When that doesn't work, his voice gets louder and LOUDER. We laugh nervously in the cool breeze and hope our closest neighbors don't tell us they heard his voice in their dreams demanding "Cheese," "Cheese," "Cheese"!

By dawn, the elegant moist flower petals have lost their turgor, and each puffy skirt has become a droopy tutu, withering in the wind and gently swaying on the end of an eight-inch stem. We'll have to wait many months for this moment to recur, but the wait will be worth it.

Note: My magenta cereus opens fully at night but may last a day or two.

You, too, can grow this special plant and have a midnight adventure! Learn how to grow an orchid cactus [here](#).

Nancy Flanagan, a Long Beach native, has lived with her husband (and daughter until she fledged) in Bluff Heights for 37 years. Art and the appreciation of nature are a way of life for her. She was a prop maker, display artist, costumer, bio-legal artist, puppet maker, and milkmaid on a farm who danced, hiked, made music, and volunteered in the schools. She now creates art on a whim and tends a wild backyard garden.