

DIRTY FINGERNAILS AND ALL

Ask a flower for the time

BY SIOUX ROGERS



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A couple of years ago, my son, the son of an aging gardener (I was probably gardening before my birth), suggested I create a flower clock in my garden. Not sure if he invented this idea in his own nongardening-but-brilliant mind or if he had actually heard about this concept before. I never had, but the idea was intriguing so I did some research and more research and then did...nothing. I have actually pondered this numerous times, but that is as far as I got. My non-pursuit of the idea was due to realizing that some of the plants suggested online would not grow in our Pacific Northwest Zone 7, some would spread their seeds and never go away, and some were in the category of invasive flowering weeds.

Later, when I decided to follow up on this flower-clock thing, I checked in with my brain and noted that I had only a vague idea of what I was talking about. So I googled “flowers that open at certain times” and voila! Mr. Google pointed me in the right direction. (I did know of one magical flower that blooms just a few nights once a year at around three am. My Uncle Abe, a neighbor from my childhood and one of my dear garden mentors, used to wait all year for his fragrant night-blooming cereus to bloom. That’s when he would call me at, yep, around three am. Upon hearing his words, “It is open,” I would run up the street for a whiff of the heavenly scent.)

Telling time by blooming flowers is a fanciful, intriguing, and certainly frivolous idea. However, it was originally researched in all seriousness by Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus, who called the clock “horologium florum.”

A January 2015 *New York Times* article by Michael Tortorello, titled “Five Minutes to Moonflower,” informed me that Linnaeus first observed that some flowering plants have specific times for opening and closing, depending on the weather, the light, or their own pre-set internal alarm clocks. He categorized them this way: “Meteorici” flowers change their opening and closing times according to the weather; “tropici” flowers change their opening and closing times according to the length of the day; and “aequinoctales” flowers open and close at the same time every day.

So why, you ask, is the flower clock a more frivolous and theoretical idea



Flower clock diagram from “Five Minutes to Moonstar,” *New York Times*, January 15, 2015.

than a realistic project? Well, for one thing, the observer of this open-close cycle lived in Uppsala, Sweden. The light, time, weather, and temperatures are so very different from those in, say, Washington, Florida, or Ecuador. For another thing,

even if the lovely *Convolvulus arvensis*, for example, opens and closes at a very precise time, it is the common European bindweed, whose roots can go from Applegate to China without a passport. You do *not ever* want to plant this flower. Opening and closing is also intertwined with the mating habits of the flowers, i.e., pollination. For example, some flowers have the nocturnal habits of bats, opening only at night and messing

around in the dark with the bats. Are the pollinators of flowers the same in Sweden as they are in Florida?

Flower clocks are fun and functional as long as you plan to get to work according to *their* alarm clock, not yours. Anyhow, Linnaeus’s flower clock ended at eight pm, so using his “alarm clock” for the night shift won’t happen.

Apparently, Linnaeus never actually planted a flower clock. But if I ever plant a night-blooming cereus and it does open at 3 am, I will give you a call.

Dirty fingernails and all,
Sioux Rogers
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Example of flowering clock in Victoria Square, Christchurch, New Zealand (tomclarkblog.blogspot.com/2009/05/linnaeus-flower-clock.html).

Possible clock flowers in the Applegate

If you want to try to make a clock flower a reality, here is a list of some plants that might work in the Applegate Valley.

- 6 am:** Pumpkin blossom
- 9 am:** Cichorium intybus (chicory)
- 12 pm:** Carpobrotus edulis (ice plant)
- 3 pm:** Avonia quinaria (lithops)
- 6 pm:** Nymphaea alba (European white waterlily—plant in a water container)
- 9 pm:** Ipomoea alba (moonflower or morning glory)
- 12 am:** Selenicereus grandiflorus (queen of the night)
- 3 am:** Night-blooming cereus

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