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Ok, I've got my botanical journal out...
 Blue spruce? ✓ Oak tree? ✓
 Sea rose? ✓ *Yucca filamentosa*?
 Fireball hibiscus!?!

BY DAVID SVENSON

My colleague, a native New Englander, stops at my desk. With a note of surprise, he exclaims, "Hey, that's *YUCCA FILAMENTOSA*!" He's pointing to the faraway image on my computer screen of the shooting, leathery green leaves of the Yucca. "There's one behind some rose bushes at Cumberland Avenue and Hanover Street."

I'm not so surprised he knows Yucca as I am that it's actually here. In fact, Maine acts as generous host to a variety of plants some might deem too exotic or fragile for the climate. Like a Floridian in Maine, these *offlanders* add a peculiar sense of place to our far-north gardens.

"*Yucca filamentosa* doesn't look like anything you'd expect to find in Maine," says Sue McIntyre of Longfellow's Greenhouses in Manchester. "It grows out west in the high desert, with wide, flat leaves and



From top: Yucca is found on Portland's peninsula, on Cumberland Avenue and Vesper Street; This red Hot Poker (*Kniphofia*) attracts birds, including sparrows (pictured) and hummingbirds; Attention gardeners: The fireball hibiscus is deer resistant!

Snow Falling on Yuccas



FROM TOP: BIOLIB.CZ/VISOFLORA, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS/MIKE PENNINGTON/GEOGRAPH.ORG.UK; AN IOWA GARDEN/DON BOLIN

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FOOTPRINTS OF THE YUCCA IN THE SNOW—Sue McIntyre of Longfellow's Greenhouses says *Yucca filamentosa* will "grow just fine" in Maine, as is proven on Munjoy Hill's Vesper Street in Portland.

a tall spike of white, bell-like flowers—they can reach 5-feet high!" And in the winter? "It doesn't die back to the ground. In spring, new growth comes up from the center. They'll grow just fine here, as long as the soil drains well. After all, they're more desert-like than anything."

Although a plant might die to the ground, some can make it back. According to Tim Bate, nursery manager at Skillins Greenhouses in Falmouth, "The **HARDY HIBISCUS FIREBALL** works really well for us here. It's herbaceous, so the cold kills the stems, but they'll grow back." This bright red, flowering perennial, common in states like Florida, puts on an impressive display: "The flowers are pretty large—10 to 12 inches across!" Imagine, a yearly luau in Cape Elizabeth...

The power of these plants is their ability to bring the world to Maine. Tim Bate also recommends *Kniphofia*, or **RED HOT POKER**, as a perennial to add an exotic flair to flower beds. With a single stem projecting straight up with red, yellow, and orange tube-shaped flowers, it's easy to come to terms with its incendiary name. "You find it in a lot of southern gardens, like in the Carolinas," Bates says. "But this variation is native to the mountains of South Africa, so it's more cold-hardy than the tropical form.

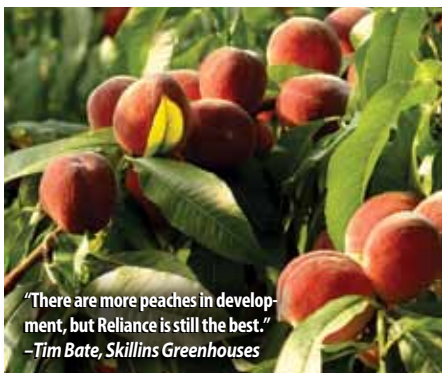
"There's also **ARCTIC KIWI** and **UMBRELLA BAMBOO**," Bates continues. "People find it unusual that these plants grow here. The bamboo isn't the running kind, so they're nice in the garden. They clump together, won't invade the area, and grow up to 10-foot tall. They're hardy even to [-20° to -15°F].

"In the winter, the bamboo will lose its leaves, but it'll sprout again from the stems in the spring." And kiwi? "It's not the typical kind. It produces grape-sized fruit that tastes just like what we're used to." Surprisingly,

OUTDOORS

Maine's kiwi isn't coated in the familiar fuzz over its skin.

There is something growing in Maine that keeps its fine layer of hair, however. Developed at University of New Hampshire, the **RELIANCE PEACH** does well in the southern parts of the state. Kristen Glazier, co-owner of Roaring Brook Nurseries in Wales, is quite familiar with this fruit illustrated on Georgia license plates. "A lot of homeowners have great success with the peach because they're in a wooded area, and they tell me what great crops they get year after year. Out in the open, like on a farm, chances are slim that it'll survive. But people are making them work, and they taste even better than store-bought peaches—what we describe as having a cardboard taste."



"There are more peaches in development, but Reliance is still the best."
—Tim Bate, Skillins Greenhouses

These Northern New England peach trees will continue to grow like their Georgia counterparts, "three to four feet a year, with very fragrant pink blossoms," says Glazier. "Just trim off any winter-damaged stems."

At Viles Arboretum in Augusta, their *Magnolia acuminata*, or **CUCUMBER TREE**, enjoys near celebrity status. "It's 35-feet tall," says executive director Mark DesMeules. "When Hurricane Irene came through, it blew it completely over. Colby students came and helped us right it. It's not naturally found in Maine—maybe New Jersey would be the farthest north."

Bill Cullina, executive director at Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens in Boothbay Harbor, sees the USDA's updated hardiness zoning, which reclassifies more southern plants to our area, as part of a trend. "Looking at the map, Maine has a lot of icy colors, but then there's this little oasis of green along the mid-coast," says Cullina. "The climate has warmed during the last 30 years. Things are changing." ■

For more, visit portlandmonthly.com/portmag/2012/01/snow-falling-on-yuccas-extras.

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