

Here's the latest in spring fashions – See Section 2

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the Country Almanac



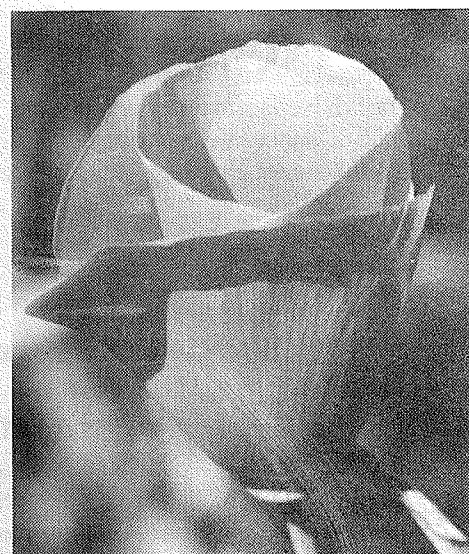
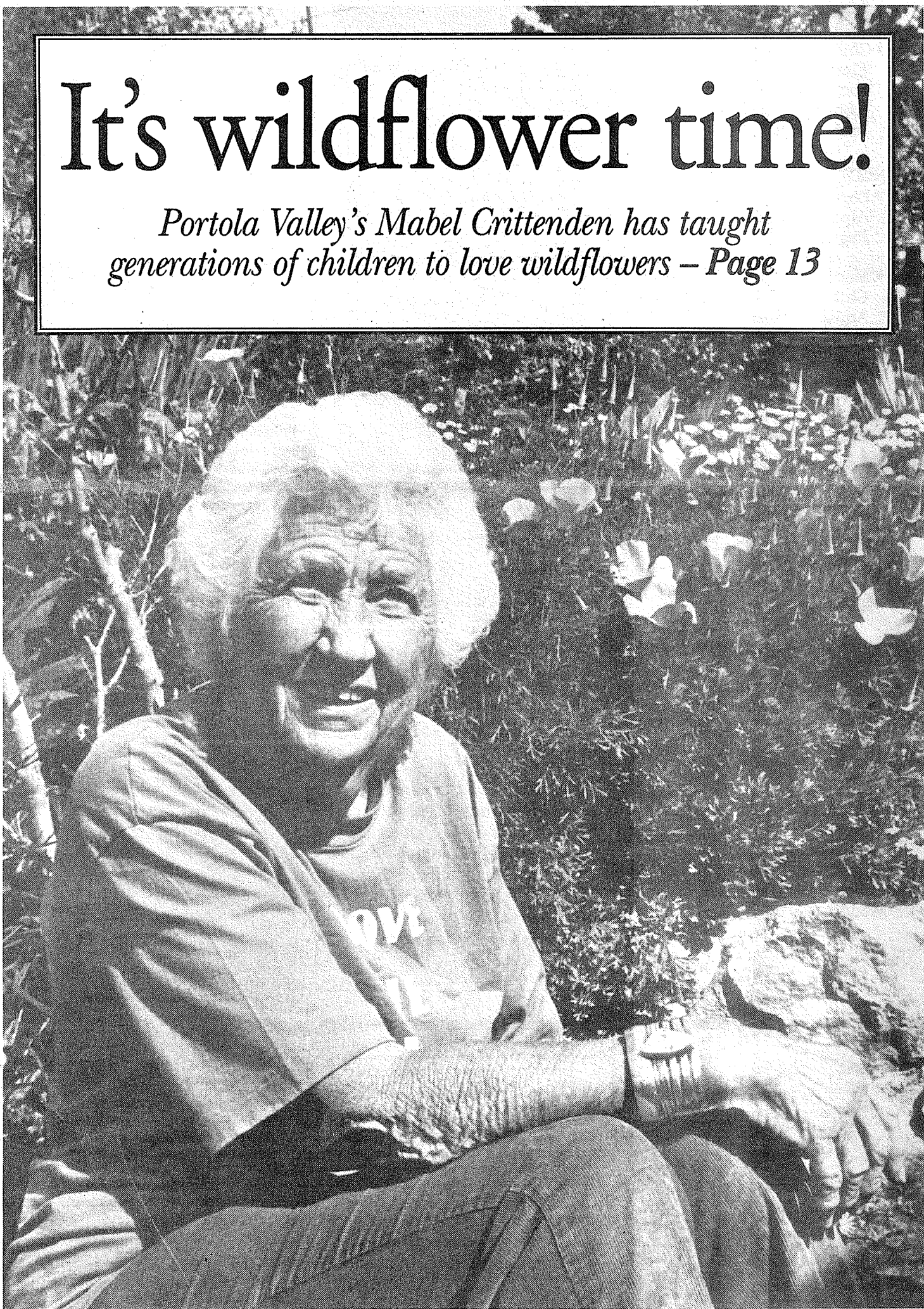
Vol. XXVI, No. 13 March 25, 1992

For 25 years the independent hometown paper for Woodside, Portola Valley and Atherton

Phone 328-1600

It's wildflower time!

Portola Valley's Mabel Crittenden has taught generations of children to love wildflowers – Page 13



NOW BLOOMING in local meadows are the rare white fritillary, top, and the abundant California poppy, bottom.

PHOTO BY CAROL IVIE



It's wildflower time!

Portola Valley's wildflower lady tells what to see, where and when

BY MARION SOFTKY

What better way to welcome spring than by getting out into the wildflowers that adorn California each spring with points of beauty and acres of color.

"If nothing else, drive up Highway 280 — in the slow lane," says Mabel Crittenden, Portola Valley's legendary wildflower lady. "I've seen patches of cream cups or tidy tips, and the bush lupine are gorgeous."

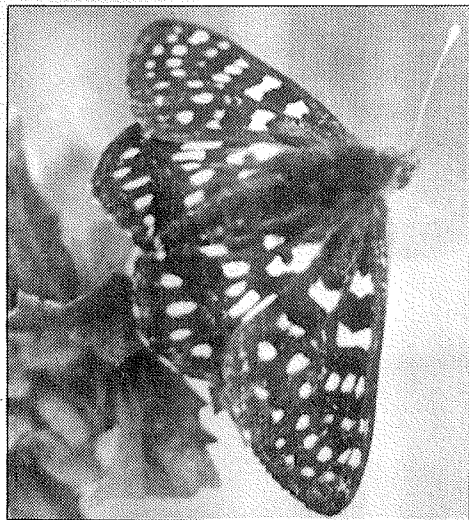
For 16 years Mrs. Crittenden taught generations of children at Corte Madera School to love and understand the native wildflowers that grace the local woods and hills.

Better yet, Mrs. Crittenden suggests, walk Edgewood County Park (at 280 and Edgewood Road,) take a guided tour on Stanford's Jasper Ridge Biological Preserve, or hike some of the 30,000 acres of open space owned by the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District. A drive along Skyline Boulevard is a good place to start.

"If you have time, you should go up Mt.



GOLDFIELD carpet the meadows with yellow.



BAY CHECKERSPOT butterfly, an officially threatened species, feeds only on special plants in serpentine areas.

Hamilton and down the other side. It's an all-day drive, but it's fabulous," says Mrs. Crittenden. "There are shooting stars along the creeks, and meadows filled with goldfield and poppies and lupine and johnny jump-ups."

Most spectacular of all, this year, should be the deserts of Southern California. The storms that have swept across the southern part of the state have created the right conditions for seeds to sprout and bloom. "The seeds have a protective coat that allows them to stay dormant until there's adequate rain at the proper time," she says.

"Joshua Tree National Monument is my favorite because it has so much elevation change and so much north and south extent. You can catch them over a longer period of time," Mrs. Crittenden adds. "They usually peak around Easter."

Mrs. Crittenden thinks she must have gotten her love of wildflowers "in her chromosomes." Her mother lived in Utah and loved the wildflowers in the Wasatch Mountains, she recalls.

Mrs. Crittenden and her four daughters later spent many happy summers on field trips in the Wasatch. They camped and observed wildflowers while her husband, the late Max Crittenden, studied the rocks and geology of the range.

Among the flowers surrounding Mrs. Crittenden's hilltop home, strikingly patterned rocks retrieved from the Wasatch recall those wonderful times.

Mrs. Crittenden's gift with flowers is not limited to wildflowers. Her garden is aglow with all kinds of flowers from natives through daffodils to pots of orchids on the terrace.

Two of her flowers may be of interest to country residents who find the deer like to share their gardens. A cheery clump of white daisy-like chrysanthemum paladosum and some large golden teagate marigolds "totally repel deer. That's why I can grow pansies," she says.

Even as a sophomore at Palo Alto High School, Mrs. Crittenden's love of flowers drove her to ask her teacher for a course in botany. Not unless she could sign up 13 students, she was told. "I came in the next day with signatures of 13 friends," she recalls. That may have been the only botany course in the history of the school, she suggests.

While studying botany at San Jose State, she met Max Crittenden. "My father was a geology professor, and Max was his star pupil," she recalls.

The Crittendens moved to Portola Valley in 1956. When Mrs. Crittenden couldn't find a half-time job teaching high school, she took a job as librarian at Corte Madera School and taught flowers on the side.

"I think I taught more kids science that way than I could have in a classroom," she comments.

Working with children, she and Dorothy Telfer developed direct ways of introducing children to the concepts of botany — like counting petals. Their resulting book, "Wildflowers of the West," is due to be reprinted soon, Mrs. Crittenden hopes.

Besides having smiley faces for plants that are good to eat, and frowny faces for poisonous plant, the book introduces the

Photos by
Carol Ivie and Marion Softky



MABEL CRITTENDEN has taught generations of children to love wildflowers in such areas as Edgewood Park (above, left).

reader to the appealing concept of the "belly flower — a flower so tiny you have to get down on your belly to see it."

No, she didn't invent the idea of belly flower, she says. There is actually a tiny desert flower called *Bellioides*. (pronounced belly-oidees).

"You see, botanists do have a sense of humor."



TIDY TIPS have yellow centers and white tips.

Talks and walks for wildflower lovers

For those who can't take off for the desert to catch the magic moment when the desert wildflowers are blooming, Mrs. Crittenden is giving a slide show on "Desert Wildflowers" this Friday, March 27 at 7:45 p.m. at the Baylands Nature Center at the end of Embarcadero in Palo Alto. The talk is sponsored by the California Native Plant Society.

People interested in seeing desert wildflowers can find where they are at their peak by calling the 24-hour Wildflower Hotline at (818) 768-3533. It has a weekly message alerting callers to the best wildflower areas within a day's drive

of Los Angeles.

Several local organizations are sponsoring guided walks of Peninsula wildflower areas this spring:

- The California Native Plant Society experts will lead a three-hour walk through the wildflowers at Edgewood Park every weekend through June 14. For information call John Allen at 366-4910 or Jan Simpson at 368-1057.

- For information on hikes on preserves of the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District call 949-5500.

- To join a guided tour at Jasper Ridge Biological Preserve call 327-2277.