

SHORT - DAY SHRUBS FOR FALL & WINTER COLOR

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Many of the annuals and perennials used in the landscape bloom throughout the season, while many others reach a peak of bloom during the season. In South Florida, the growing season is year-round, which places great demands on flowering plants. During late Summer/early Fall there is often a lull in flowering, a time when we could use more flowers.

One way to fill this need is to use permanent plants that bloom profusely when days become noticeably shorter in the Fall. Such plants are called “short-day plants.” They bloom when the daylength (actually, it’s the nightlength) reaches a length that is set genetically for the species or cultivar (cv).

This fact-sheet covers six tender perennials used as shrubs that provide the color needed during the Fall & early Winter in South Florida. Some also are used as annuals in areas north of us.

***Brugmansia* spp.**

Solanaceae (Nightshade) family. Angel trumpets. There are two types. The larger-growing types produce foot-long, usually single, pendant flowers that angle out & become most fragrant at night. These seldom produce seed, and are being called *Brugmansia* these days. The smaller types, with up-facing flowers, often “hose-in-hose” doubles, which produce seed regularly here, are called *Datura*. The common name “angel trumpet” is well-known, used for both types. We in Florida use “*Datura*” (pronounced day-tour’-uh) for both types. Both types are poisonous, especially the seeds.

Angel trumpets can present problems. The trouble stems from the fact that they are **tropicals** that **dislike high temperatures**. Most cultivars are derived from hybrids between two or more species native to different areas of tropical America. Some parents are native to lowland Brazil (a hot climate), others to the Andes (a cool climate). The resulting

hybrids like cooler temperatures, but cannot tolerate frost.

So why bother with angel trumpets at all? We stay away from carnations, fuchsias, and other plants that can’t take the Florida heat, or we grow them as Winter annuals. The payoff is in the Fall when the nights drop below 70° F. Multitudes of 10 to 12 in. trumpet-shaped flowers are produced in colors ranging from white to apricot-peach, pink, & yellow, depending on the cultivar. Most of the cvs are fragrant, especially at night. There are even cultivars with variegated foliage. (They also re-bloom several times during our cool Winter.)

The flowers are most fragrant at night, and reminiscent of Easter-lilies. They will tolerate full sun, but they prefer partial shade, especially in the afternoon. The plants are reasonably root-hardy in zone 8, and they will grow 3 to 5 feet in one season, even if they are frozen to the ground. Even in areas where they overwinter intact, as in South Florida, it is best to cut the plants back to the ground each year, after flowering stops in the Spring, to encourage the development of strong new shoots. Many gardeners grow them as small, multi-trunked trees. Grown this way they can reach 10 ft. Angel trumpets root readily from cuttings, which grow rapidly if kept watered & fertilized. All parts of the plant are poisonous, so use carefully where small children or pets are around.

***Hibiscus acetosella*.**

Malvaceae (Mallow) family. Maroon mallow. The classification of this *Hibiscus* species is not clear. It is often sold as *H. sabdariffa*, Jamaica sorrel, but Jamaica sorrel has yellow, not maroon, flowers.

Maroon mallow is closely related to Roselle. It grows vigorously from seed, & requires headroom unless you plan to shear it regularly. It grows taller

than wide, roughly 7 x 4 ft. The Fall & Winter blooms are a pretty pink-maroon, but small, & definitely take second-fiddle to the foliage. Unless you’re looking for them, you may not notice the flowers.

The leaves are palmately lobed, & tend to be oriented so the lobes hang downward, giving the plant a rather formal look, reminiscent of Japanese maples. They are a dark maroon color, and get darker the more sun they get. Nobody will fail to notice this hibiscus. It needs full sun, & benefits from fertilizer several times each year, & water as needed.

One note of caution. The seed capsules (like tiny, 1/2 in long, maroon-colored pods of okra) are covered with prickly hairs that can stick in your fingers, & the sticks burn. Landscape customers normally don’t harvest seeds, so this should not be a problem. It can be handled by cutting off the small fruit with pruning shears & letting them drop into a paper bag. After drying for a few days the seeds fall free of the capsules if you shake the bag well.

You also can empty the contents of the bag onto a prepared bed, and lightly sprinkle some growing mix over them; the seeds germinate well on their own without cleaning. There may volunteers, so keep an eye on it—it could become invasive.

Maroon mallow is a weak perennial for us in South Florida, and behaves as a short-lived shrub, lasting 2 to 4 yrs. Cut it back severely in Spring so all the new growth is fresh and clean. The tops can be cut into pieces about 6 inches long, treated with IBA, and will root in good percentages. Seedlings, however, are more vigorous, and will give you a plant with better shape.

***Tagetes lucida*.**

Formerly Compositae (Composite) family, now

Asteraceae (Aster). Mexican mint marigold. Mexican mint marigold flowers from mid-Fall on. It is native to Mexico and Guatemala, and usually hardy to zone 8 (all of Florida). A well drained, sunny location is required. It is drought tolerate and usually free of pests. This marigold produces a ton of small (1/2 inch) single, bright yellow flowers. The plant is noted for its anise (licorice)-scented foliage. The leaves can be used in teas, and as an herb in cooking (for the anise flavor).

In bloom, Mexican mint marigold really makes a statement. If planted next to blue-flowered plants like *Barleria* or *Plumbago*, the effect can be stunning. Plants root easily from cuttings and require little care once established. This plant can potentially be a substitute for traditional marigolds in South Florida.

***Malvaviscus arboreus var. mexicanus*.**

Malvaceae (Mallow) family. Giant Turk’s cap. Reliably hardy to zone 9; suitable for all of peninsular Florida. The plant closely resembles the regular Turk’s cap, which is grown as a low herbaceous perennial in zones 8-9. The giant is considered a botanical variety of *M. a.* The biggest distinction is the size of the plant & flowers when compared to the herbaceous Turk’s cap. Giant Turk’s cap grows to 7 ft, & the 3-in. flowers hang straight down. Produced in the Fall, they are bright cherry red, & contrast well with Mexican mint marigold & other yellow fall-blooming composites.

Herbaceous Turk’s cap tolerates shade & drought, but Giant Turk’s cap demands full sun & regular watering. The common Turk’s cap of South Florida is probably *M.a. var. m.*

***Barleria cristata*.**

Acanthaceae (Acanthus) family. Philippine violet. This plant is neither a violet, nor a native of the Philippines. It is from India and Burma. A perennial

in tropical and subtropical areas, it is often used as an annual in temperate gardens.

Barleria is a short-day plant, but most gardeners in South Florida just think of it as a Winter-bloomer. It starts blooming during late September in North Florida. There it may be damaged by frost, but is root-hardy, so usually comes back. Barleria continues to bloom off and on all Winter, but the best show is the first flush. It will grow to 3-5 ft or more in height with a similar spread, and responds well to good cultural practices and full sun.

For us in South Florida, that means water it and **definitely fertilize it**. If you don't plan to fertilize Barleria, you shouldn't grow it. It just doesn't make a good show without good soil, good growing mix, and fertilizer. The flowers are purplish blue or white, about 1 inch in diameter and 2 inches long. Barleria makes a good show with Fall- and Winter-blooming yellow-flowered plants. The blue is fully accented by the yellow. Barleria is of medium texture, with 2 to 4 inch leaves, and makes an attractive plant even when not in bloom, especially if fertilized. It responds well to sheering, but stop by the first of September if you want it to flower.

Odontonema strictum.

Acanthaceae (Acanthus) family. Firespike. This is a relatively new plant in the trade outside South Florida. It is being offered way up north (places like Alabama and Georgia) as a bedding plant, treated as an annual. It is native to Central America, and like the other plants profiled here, is a short-day bloomer. It requires some shade during the summer, but can withstand high temperatures with no problem. One of its major assets is the fact that it will bloom well in shade.

The small, tubular flowers are held up high in a spike, raceme, or panicle (well-grown plants produce more branches in the cluster), and are a scarlet red color, hence the name firespike. The leaves are a rich green color, and appear to be thick and succulent. They are

oblong and 6 inches or more in length. *Odontonema* can grow to 6 feet, although 3 to 4 feet is more common. In poor-soil sites it will bloom at one or 2 feet.

Firespike will survive most winters in Central and North Florida. If given some protection, it resprouts from the roots. The exact hardiness range has not been established. The plants should be cut back in the Spring to encourage branching and the production of new, fresh shoots. The common form has bright red flowers. Another form being offered as a bedding plant has more purplish or fuchsia flowers.

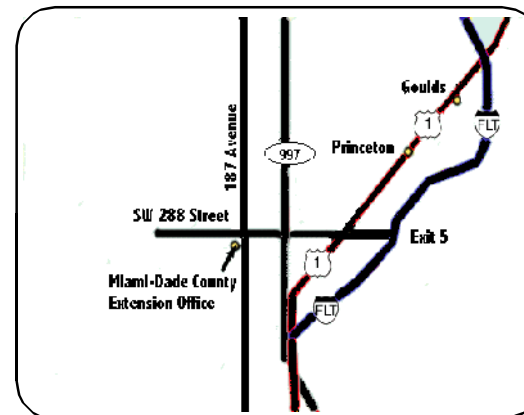
As with barleria, firespike should be watered and fertilized regularly if it is to perform well. I first met firespike in New Orleans, growing under a very large live oak, in full bloom and six ft tall. With either rich soil or good fertilization, this is a spectacular ornamental.

Selected references

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In Writing

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