

## A WORD OR TWO ABOUT GARDENING

### **Your Miami-Dade Landscape can be a Great Source of Holiday Color**

How is this for an idea? A colorful yard for the holiday season, but without a trip to the mini-warehouse to lug out all those decorations or the need to string up miles of lights. Instead you leave everything in place because that is where it stays year round. Moreover you don't need to set a timer and use enough power to light up a cruise ship; these decorations have a build in timer and turn on of their own accord, powered by the sun. Since this is a gardening column it will come as no surprise that I refer of course to all the superb plants that can color our local landscaping at this time of year. Some local residents already rely on the many bedding plants that become available in the fall at local garden centers. In this article the focus is on landscape items that will last for more than one season.

Last year at this time I discussed three holiday favorites, poinsettias, amaryllis and Christmas cactus. Widely used as decorative indoor plants, the first two items can also remain year round in the landscape, though amaryllis will bloom in late spring rather than late fall/winter. There are many other plants however that can provide color in Miami-Dade landscapes from late fall into the New Year. There are those that bloom on and off year round, favorites such as **blue plumbago**, **chenille plant**, **hibiscus**, **ixora** and **peregrina**, just to mention a few. While not necessarily at their showiest at this time of year they can be relied on to contribute some garden color.

One familiar year round bloomer is often at its best as any local rose enthusiast will attest. Unlike gardeners further north there is no need to severely cut back roses as winter approaches. I recall rose bushes, buried under fallen trees after hurricane Andrew, that were ablaze with blooms by Christmas to brighten up an otherwise rather bleak landscape. The same was true last year after hurricane Wilma; large heirloom shrub roses that had been totally denuded of foliage were full of flowers a week after Thanksgiving.

The earliest cold wave (night time temperatures below 40°F) usually arrives after Thanksgiving, as early as mid December. **Musseandas** and **allamandas** will flower year round given a warm moist climate but in Miami-Dade they usually have ceased flowering by Christmas. Musseandas, especially the 'Dona Aurorae' hybrids invariably lose most of their blooms and some leaves with the first significant cold front. At Thanksgiving there may still be some of the large pink flowers left on **floss silk trees (chorisia, Ceiba speciosa)**, more especially the less common white flowering **Ceiba insignis**. Chorisias flower at an early age and are becoming increasingly popular - local flowering tree nurseries are now growing some exciting new cultivars. Two other outstanding flowering trees that bloom during fall are **Colville's glory (Colvillea racemosa)** and a late flowering pink cassia, **Cassia roxburghii (red cassia)**. Colville's glory has been described as a late season royal poinciana, with feathery foliage and a similar profile, though more upright and less spreading. Usually sparsely branched, smooth downy buds in pendent cone shaped racemes open in November to reveal vivid orange to scarlet flowers. The red cassia has a striking appearance with sheets of foliage cascading almost to the ground.

Late summer into fall intense rosy colored flower appear in axillary racemes, contrasting well with the deep green pinnate leaves and lasting well into fall.

More familiar, the **Hong Kong orchid tree** (*Bauhinia x blakeana*) is recommended for both its extremely showy flowers (produced from fall into winter) and the fact that it is sterile (no seedling volunteers as with other orchid trees). However like other orchid trees it is weak wooded necessitating careful pruning. An even more striking tree that is often in bloom over Christmas, though flowering is variable, is the showiest of the pink tabebuias, the **pink trumpet tree** (*Tabebuia impetiginosa*). Flowering when the tree is bare the rich purplish pink flowers are far more stunning than the common pink tabebuia *T. heterophylla*, the blooms of which are often sparse and pallid by comparison. If you would like some yellow flowering trees/shrubs to brighten up the landscape then **Caesalpinia vesicaria** is a small, tough, flowering tree that could be used more, flowering late fall into winter. The **chestnut-leaved yellow elder** (*Tecoma castanifolia*) flowers sporadically fall into early spring with a profusion of bright golden yellow trumpet-shaped flowers. This is less weedy as well as more upright than the more familiar yellow elder (*T. stans*) and can be grown as a small tree (to 20').

The focus of this column is on landscape plants that flower late fall into winter, and in some instances the common or cultivar name can be a clue as to when flowering occurs. **Euphorbia leucocephala** is for most of the year a rather ordinary 8-10' shrub. However from early November through December into the New Year it is clear why it is commonly known as **pascuita** or **little Christmas flower**. Like the poinsettia, to which it is related, ornamental appeal resides not in the true flowers, but the associated cyathophylls (bracts). These transform the shrub into a large airy white cloud with the flowers providing a delicate sweet fragrance. Once the show is over cut back heavily, then prune lightly as required up until late August. Pruning after this can reduce flowering since like the poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*), pascuita is a short day plant (see below), differentiation of flower bud primordia occurring as days shorten. Flowering of pascuita is also improved if it is situated away from street lights (cf. poinsettia). Otherwise all that is required is a site in full sun with free draining soil.

It can be misleading placing too much significance in a plant's common name. *Metrosideros excelsa*, ablaze with brilliant red flowers during the summer, is known commonly as the New Zealand Christmas tree. Down under of course, Christmas occurs during summer. In California, where it is used as a coastal flowering tree, *M. excelsa* blooms spring into summer.

While in Miami-Dade we can enjoy "real" roses during the holiday season, those of you from cooler climes may well be acquainted with the often tardy Christmas rose (*Helleborus niger* – it's not a rose but in the buttercup family). We cannot grow hellebores in south Florida, but we can grow an altogether different "**Christmas rose**", a flowering tree from Africa that is more commonly known as **tropical snowball** (*Dombeya wallichii*). Dombeyas grow as large shrubs in Miami-Dade and flower from late fall through winter. Individual flowers range from white to cream through various shades of pink to red and are arranged in dense umbellate cymes – each inflorescence resembles a hydrangea looking nothing like rose blossoms.

Rather than *D. wallichii*, where the flowers tend to be obscured by the large coarse leaves choose *D. burgessiae*. The inflorescence can vary both in shape and color (white to pink) - the cultivar 'Seminole' is especially attractive with deep pink flowers, and is available in some local nurseries. Situate in full sun, water once soil starts to dry out, apply a complete slow release fertilizer in early spring and late summer, and deadhead to extend flowering.

If the yellow flowering trees listed above aren't enough, **Christmas bush** and **Christmas candles** are common names for two sennas flowering during the holiday season, *Senna bicapsularis* and *S. alata* respectively. Other sennas flower at this time of year including the popular **glaucous cassia** (*S. surattensis*) and **desert senna**, *S. polyphylla* as well as the native **Bahama cassia** (*S. mexicana* var. *chapmanii*), the latter two both drought tolerant low maintenance shrubs. Two other native plants with seasonal interest are **Christmas berry** (*Lycium carolinianum*) and the **Dahoon holly** (*Ilex cassine*). The former is a medium-size, open, spreading shrub (to 6') in the potato family (Solanaceae) with small succulent leaves and attractive pale blue to lavender flowers. Flowering is most pronounced late summer into fall, followed in winter by cheery bright red berries, the shrubs principal ornamental feature. Christmas berry is especially suited for ocean front properties, just be careful of the spines (the shrubs other common name is Carolina desert thorn).

While we cannot grow the common holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) seen on greeting cards, Dahoon holly can at least provide us with berries, if not the spiny margined leaves. It grows as a large shrub or tree and is best suited to enriched, moist somewhat acid soils, surviving on local limestone if irrigated during periods of hot dry weather. Berries form during fall but can remain on the tree for several months. Since dahoon holly is dioecious, berries form only on trees bearing female flowers. You will need to plant a male flowering tree in order to obtain a heavy show of berries. There is one other native (*Callicarpa americana*, **beauty berry**) that can provide highly decorative berries at least into Thanksgiving - if migrating birds don't consume all of them! Beautyberry can grow to about 6' and appreciates moist enriched soil. It should be severely pruned back in late winter to encourage new growth.

For a real conversation item for out-of-town holiday visitors the bright red bristly fruit of an **annatto tree** (*Bixa orellana*) is sure to attract attention. This is a small tree (10-12') with clusters of 2" pale pink flowers appearing in the fall. It succeeds best if local limestone soils are enriched with some organic matter, and mulch is used to help retain soil moisture. In Miami-Dade controlling powdery mildew, particularly from late winter into early summer, can be a problem.

The term short day plant was introduced above: as days become shorter during late summer genes responsible for differentiation of reproductive tissue (i.e. flowers) are switched on. Rather than decreased daylight it is actually increased darkness that is the stimulus. Among trees and shrubs this is a phenomenon restricted to those endemic to warm winter climates. Other extrinsic factors can also affect flowering to varying degrees including soil moisture (or more accurately the plants internal moisture reserves), nutritional status (i.e., fertilizer use) and when last pruned. Temperature is also important - if too low flower buds can be injured or in

some instances flowering will only occur if temperatures are sufficiently cool. This is the case with the winter flowering butterfly bush (*Buddleia asiatica*) which flowers in central Florida, but not in Miami-Dade. Similarly *Camelia japonica* and *Hardenbergia* (a blue flowering Australian vine grown in southern California) flower in mid winter providing overnight temperatures remain below 55°F.

With all of the above factors potentially at play it is not possible to pinpoint exactly when a given plant will flower. In south Florida bougainvilleas respond as short day plants, with flowering usually commencing in late fall/early winter, but they will flower at other times of the year if the soil becomes sufficiently dry. Where vegetative growth is stimulated through too much fertilizer nitrogen, flower production will be suppressed, while pruning after early September can delay or severely reduce flowering.

Assuming bougainvilleas are growing under optimal conditions, i.e. a site with perfect drainage that receives full sun, you can help to ensure reliable late fall flowering by leaving well alone after late summer save for attending to any disease/pest problem. Pruning, which can be quite severe, should be done in late spring or once flowering subsides. At this time also provide a complete slow release fertilizer with subsequent applications of trace element nutritional supplements as required. An established bougainvillea should never require watering – remember, dry soils help to promote flowering.

Compared to the trees discussed above there are many more shrubs and herbaceous perennials that flower late fall to winter. As with bougainvillea it is advisable to limit pruning and fertilizer use after late summer. Apart from the decorative berries of the native Christmas berry discussed above, the Solanaceae contains some particularly attractive late fall/winter flowering shrubs and vines from which to choose. The most colorful is the appropriately named **marmalade bush** (*Streptosolen jamesonii*), a sprawling evergreen shrub from 4-6', which from late fall into early spring is covered with small trumpet shaped flowers at first golden yellow then becoming suffused with a rich orange. Choose a site in full sun with free draining soil, water during dry weather, less so when temperatures cool.

A more familiar cool season solanaceous shrub is **yesterday-today-and-tomorrow**, a common name applied to several species of brunfelsias of which *Brunfelsia grandiflora* is best adapted to Miami-Dade soil conditions. Flowers occur in clusters from winter through spring, at first appearing deep purplish blue, fading to light blue then white. Provide some partial shade from hot afternoon sun, water to maintain soil moisture, reducing frequency during the cool season. lochromes are a group of medium sized shrubs with clusters of funnel shaped flowers - like miniature angel's trumpets. They flower on and off throughout the year but in Miami-Dade flower production is optimum during the cool months of the year. *Lochroma cyaneum* (**Mexican bluebell**) grows into an 8' somewhat lax shrub with grayish green leaves and clusters of deep blue to purple, slender, tubular flowers. Some light shade from hot afternoon sun is beneficial as well as protection from direct wind (wood is brittle). The cultivar 'Sky King' has light blue flowers and 'Royal Blue' deep blue flowers, whilst 'Plum' has rosy purple flowers. Foliage can be damaged by flea beetles. *Lochroma fuchsoides* (**red bells**) is a lower growing species of limited

availability but much in demand for its brilliant orangey red flowers. It appreciates somewhat more shade from hot sun.

The last of these solanaceous plants are the spectacular **chalice vines** – just make sure you have a large sturdy trellis or pergola for support. There is some confusion as to what is offered in the nursery trade: often listed as ***Solandra guttata*** it is in most instances more likely ***S. maxima***. Identity apart, *S. maxima* is a heavy woody vine with deep green ovate leaves. Beginning in late fall, large (10”) cup shaped flowers appear, butter yellow at first deepening to gold and inside five prominent purple lines. At night the flowers are delightfully fragrant. Another species ***S. longifolia*** has similar flowers but is available in a variegated form with green and white leaves (purple at first). It is also reported to be adapted to alkaline soils. Solandras should be grown in full sun, cut back in spring once flowering is over and then fertilized. Water as required to maintain soil moisture through summer, but as cool weather approaches allow the soil to dry out (this encourages flowering).

The Acanthaceae is another family containing attractive late fall/winter blooming plants. Most familiar is ***Barleria cristata* (Philippine violet)** a stiff stemmed 4-5’ semi-woody shrub. Admittedly it looks very attractive once the spikes of violet blue flowers appear in mid October, but it self-seeds so much that I tired of pulling up the countless volunteers. Forms of *B. cristata* are also available with white, pink or mauve flowers. ***Eranthemum pulchellum* (blue sage)** is a related blue flowering shrub for winter that is far preferable. It is a soft wooded multi-stemmed shrub, growing to about 3-4’ with a spread of 5-6’. From December into early April it produces handsome spikes of deep blue flowers. In Miami-Dade, *Eranthemum* is best planted in enriched soil choosing a site with either dappled or some afternoon shade. In full hot sun the shrub will rapidly wilt unless watered frequently. Deadhead to encourage further flowering, then once flowering is finished drastically prune, cutting stems back by a half and totally removing those that are dead or yellowing. Apply fertilizer after pruning and again in late summer. ***Eranthemum wattii*** is a far less familiar, smaller shrub with larger more purplish flowers.

Two other late flowering members of the Acanthaceae are the popular **firespike, *Odontanema callistachyum*** and the **shrimp plant (*Justicea brandegeana*** – latter may flower year round but flowering locally is best in our cool season. The firespike flowers equally well in full sun or part shade, while the shrimp plant prefers dappled shade (prevents flower bracts losing color). These are both easy plants to grow and can be readily propagated from divisions. Shrimp plant may escape from cultivation so exercise caution near native plant habitats.

If you have fond childhood memories of daisy chains then from fall to early winter the 10-15’ Mexican tree daisy, ***Montonoa hibiscifolia*** is for you. A fast growing soft-stemmed shrub to 15-20’, it has large, downy, deeply lobed leaves and from late fall is covered in daisy like inflorescences, white ray florets and central disc florets yellow. The related **tree marigold, *Tithonia diversifolia***, is smaller, to 12’, also with deeply lobed leaves and from fall into winter produces inflorescences made up of bright orangey yellow ray florets and yellow disc florets. These both make coarse leggy landscape plants but are quite striking when in flower, especially the latter



species. Yet more yellow flowering shrubs: the familiar, **thryallis** (*Galphimia gracilis*) and the not so familiar, **yellow flax** *Reinwardtia indica*. Thryallis is a 3-5' shrub blooming for much of the year, the clusters of small yellow flowers especially attractive in fall and winter. This is a useful source of yellow in the landscape for areas that are shaded for part of the day – stems are brittle so choose a site protected from strong winds. *Reinwardtia indica* (yellow flax), provides the most brilliant of yellow flowers, December to March. This is a soft stemmed, low growing shrub, rather undistinguished until it bursts into flower in early winter. Provide full sun and a moist but free draining soil - it can be difficult to maintain through a south Florida summer but it is well worth the effort.

There remains a miscellaneous group of fall/winter flowering vines and shrubs. First the familiar **pink powderpuff** *Calliandra haematocephala*, which flowers from early November through to early spring – avoid pruning after late summer and look out for thorn bugs which can be occasional pests. Incidentally the dwarf cultivar 'Nana' flowers on and off year round. Another fall flowering shrub familiar to long time south Florida gardeners, the **cape honeysuckle**, *Tecoma capensis* has a scandent sprawling habit, stems that touch the ground readily rooting. Apart from the common orange-flowering species type there are more diminutive cultivars with yellow, pale orange or mauve flowers. A shrub with an even more scandent habit (it can be grown as a vine) is the **Chinese hat plant**, *Holmskioldia sanguinea* with its unusual orangey red disc shaped flowers. The cultivar has 'Mandarin Red' bright red flowers while 'Citrina' is a yellow form. In Miami-Dade flowering occurs from late fall well into spring, after which the plant should cut back. Not particular as to soil providing it does not become too dry, it will flower in full sun or part shade.

This will be the third time I have mentioned **Rondeletia leucophylla** (shrub **pentas**) in this column, but it is such a well adapted plant for Miami-Dade tolerating local limestone soils and free of pests. Flowering from November well into spring, this 8 – 10' shrub has attractively furrowed bark, narrow willow-like leaves and compact heads of tubular rose pink flowers. Deadheading will extend flowering and once finished, prune in late spring. There are a variety of perennials other than shrubs or trees of which I can only mention a few in passing: the **red passion flower**, *Passiflora vitifolia*, the '**Orange Christmas**', *Heliconia* and numerous orchids (including **catleyas**, **cymbidiums** and *Haemaria* – **the jewel orchid**). There is an exquisite little **bromeliad** *Aechmea racinae*, which blooms during winter, and is popularly referred to as **Christmas jewel**. Provide shade and enjoy the pendent inflorescence of yellow tipped bright red flowers. It can be grown in a tree or as an attractive item for a hanging basket (use an unglazed clay pot or orchid basket).

However you choose to enjoy the holiday season try not to be as manic as Clark Griswold of National Lampoon's 'Christmas Vacation' fame when it comes to decorations. Just choose some of the above plants and in future years your yard will be a ready source of outdoor seasonal color.

John McLaughlin

November 20, 2006