

## **A WORD OR TWO ABOUT GARDENING**

### **Some sunny garden color**

In a previous article some months ago the subject of color in the landscape was introduced. On that occasion the focus was on blue flowering plants, and it was evident that, although there are a few spectacular plants to choose from, the range is limited. With yellow flowering plants, the subject of this column, the choice becomes overwhelming. From pale lemon, through bright golden to the glow of a more orangey yellow, these vibrant sunny colors and more can be found in the plants described below. Bright colors such as yellow suggest immediacy, shortening distances in the landscape – they are useful in foundation plants or those used to frame an entrance. Avoid overuse in a small yard, especially around the perimeter where creating a sense of depth would be more appropriate (blue/violet flowering plants). In a larger yard, a bright yellow border would be ideal for an open expanse of turfgrass. In addition to shrubs and vines, space could also permit the placement of one or more yellow flowering trees.

There are few more glorious sites than a leafless yellow tabebuia in full bloom against a bright blue, early spring sky. Even if the show is rather short lived, it is spectacular. Little wonder that a yellow tabebuia (*Tabebuia chrysantha*, el araguaney) is the national tree of Venezuela. This particular yellow tabebuia is uncommon in Miami-Dade, the silver trumpet tree (*T. aurea* syn. *T. caraiba*) being by far the most frequently planted species. The common name refers to the silvery scales present on the leaf surface. This tree has a reputation, locally at least, for being weak rooted and prone to windstorm damage. To reduce the risk of trees toppling, avoid planting specimens that are root bound, and sites that have poorly draining soil. In addition, plant well away from roads and buildings, and prune out storm damaged limbs to avoid subsequent disease problems. A third yellow tabebuia that is sometimes seen locally is the golden trumpet tree, *T. chrysotricha*, which is a somewhat larger (30 – 40'), more open tree. It can be distinguished from *T. aurea* by having less corky bark and the presence of reddish brown tomentum (fuzz) on the stems, undersides of leaves and capsules (the pod-like fruit). Yellow tabebuias lose all or most of their leaves before blooming in spring, and should be kept dry during winter. Flowering will also be improved by avoiding high nitrogen fertilizers and waiting until after blooming to feed the tree.

Closely related to the tabebuias with similar yellow, trumpet shaped flowers is the yellow elder (*Tecoma stans*). This 10-12' fast growing, somewhat straggly tree/shrub requires pruning to keep it tidy, and has pinnate leaves as opposed to the digitate leaves of the tabebuias. The plant is sometimes grown as an informal screen, but its main attribute is the impressive late summer/fall show of brilliant yellow, sweetly scented flowers. *Tecoma castanifolia* is very similar, but has a more erect growth habit and is easier to train as a small tree. Both plants readily self-seed, and can be weedy – remove volunteers as they appear. Another member of the Bignoniaceae, *Markhamia lutea* (mgambo, from central Africa) is a 30 – 40' drought tolerant, deciduous tree developing an attractive trim, pointed crown. It

has yellow, bell-shaped flowers with a reddish brown throat (the cultivar 'Pierrii' has a maroon striped throat), occurring in terminal panicles from spring into summer. The tree is not particular as to soil, providing it is free draining.

The bean family (Fabaceae) contains many yellow flowering trees/shrubs, of which the cassias are best known. Taxonomically they are separated into two separate genera: *Cassia* spp. are larger, often deciduous trees, and *Senna* spp. smaller, usually evergreen trees and shrubs. The golden shower tree, *Cassia fistula*, which flowers in late spring/early summer, can be used to continue the yellow theme of the yellow tabebuias. Golden shower trees grow to about 30 – 40' and are considered the tropical equivalent of the laburnum, with fragrant, very showy, pendant racemes of pale yellow flowers. The leaves are pinnate, comprising 6 – 16 unusually large leaflets (8x 3½"), the fruit a long, thin, cylindrical brown pod. The tree can be prone to root rots, so avoid poorly draining sites and root damage. Leaf spot diseases are sometimes a source of concern, however this is a temporary problem as the tree is briefly deciduous before flowering in early summer, after which new leaves emerge. The Kenyan shower tree, *Cassia afrodistula*, which is smaller, tends to form multiple trunks, with flowers in upright panicles. The tree is evergreen, drought tolerant and has an extended bloom period from summer into fall.

The *Senna* spp. trees flower late summer to fall, though some such as the desert cassia (*S. polyphylla*) can also flower on and off throughout the year. This particular tree, native to the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, is small (8 – 10'), relatively slow growing, with delicate foliage and small clusters of yellow flowers. It is an excellent choice for a sunny, dry spot in a small yard, and like other sennas, tends to become shrubby. Prune out the numerous shoots that develop from the root crown to retain a tree-like growth habit. The glaucous cassia (*Senna surattensis*), which forms a more substantial small tree (12 – 15'), is commonly seen in south Florida and frequently used to landscape local malls. This tree, like several other sennas, is also a favorite with caterpillars (sulphurs), and on occasion feeding can damage flowering shoots (not a problem for butterfly aficionados!). Compared to the desert cassia, the glaucous cassia has a denser canopy, often becoming top heavy, rendering it liable to toppling in wind storms. However, it is otherwise a reliable tree, and remains attractive year round. Other smaller sennas are used as shrubs: for instance the candlestick cassia (*Senna alata*), a 4- 10' shrub with erect spikes of yellow flowers, and Bahama senna (*S. mexicana* var. *chapmanii*), a native, large shrub with flowers in flat panicles. Both of these sennas flower during the warmer months of the year.

Staying with trees in the Fabaceae, mention should be made regarding the confusion surrounding the yellow poinciana. There is indeed a yellow flowered variety of the royal poinciana (*Delonix regia*) available as *D. regia* var. *flavida*. As the tree often does not come true from seed it needs to be grafted, a fact that contributes to these being expensive and of limited availability. There is also another species, *Delonix elata*, which has much paler almost white flowers and is even rarer in local landscapes. To add to the confusion the name yellow poinciana is also applied to various *Peltophorum* spp. (35 – 45' evergreen trees), in particular *P. dubium*. The flowers are a vibrant yellow, differing from *D. regia* var. *flavida* in having crumpled petals clustered in a more upright spike. *Peltophorum*

*pterocarpum* is better known as the copperpod, the name referring to the copper red seed pods. All of these trees are fast growing with shallow surface roots, weak wood and develop poor structure unless correctly pruned. They are showy trees, but best planted well away from sidewalks and buildings.

Another group of showy, yellow flowering shrubs/trees from the Fabaceae are also sometimes referred to as poincianas. These are the caesalpinias, of which the dwarf poinciana (*Caesalpinia pulcherrima*) is probably the best known, though locally less in evidence than 20 -30 years ago. This is an open, somewhat prickly, shrubby plant, which blooms on and off throughout the year producing flowers with crimson petals edged with yellow. A selection with all yellow flowers, *C. pulcherrima* var. *flava*, is also available. Caesalpinias are suitable for open sunny areas, able to survive poor soil and drought – a good choice for xeroscapes. The divi-divi (*C. coriaria* - the signature tree of Aruba) survives exposed beachfront locations where, in response to the prevailing wind, it develops its' characteristic lopsided, contorted, flat topped appearance. In more sheltered situations the divi-divi can grow to more than 20' with very attractive, delicate foliage and sweet smelling creamy yellow flowers. Nominally evergreen, the tree drops leaves as temperatures approach 40°F. More substantial than the divi-divi, the bridalveil tree or granadillo (*C. punctata* syn. *C. granadillo*) is outstanding as both a medium size (30 -35') shade and flowering tree. In addition to the golden yellow, summer/fall flowers, the tree develops a full open canopy with crimped, compound leaves and an attractively mottled grey/brown trunk with peeling bark. This tree is a good alternative to one of the *Peltophorum* spp. above. While the flowers are not quite as showy, it develops a more pleasing form and is much less prone to storm damage.

Before leaving the bean family, two other trees should be mentioned. The first, Jerusalem thorn (*Parkinsonia aculeata*) is an airy, small, deciduous tree with wispy green stems, numerous spines and compound leaves composed of many tiny leaflets. It is covered with clusters of yellow flowers, spring - summer. Once commonly seen, it has largely fallen out of favor locally, being more at home in an arid climate. The tree is prone to root rots and die-back in south Florida. More suited to local conditions, the Jamaican rain-tree (*Brya ebenus*), is, slender, spiny, but larger (20 -25') with, ragged peeling bark. The long drooping branches are covered with small sessile leaves - showy orangey yellow flowers appear during the warmer months in response to heavy rainfall.

Vera wood, *Bulnesia arborea*, is increasingly popular as a choice, medium size, yellow flowering tree. It is in the same family as lignum vitae and like that latter tree produces very hard, dense wood. The paired flowers are golden yellow to almost orange, with spoon-shaped petals, the compound leaves comprising 9 pairs of obliquely set, curved leaflets. This, but more particularly the opposite arrangement of the leaves and the fruit (a 5-winged capsule), distinguish vera wood from leguminous trees such as cassias, with which it is sometimes confused. Growth is initially moderate, but slows as the tree reaches its locally matures height of 30 -35'. Avoid planting root bound specimens which establish poorly and are more liable to fall over in a wind storm. Established trees are drought tolerant, low maintenance tree and quite wind resistant if correctly pruned during early

development. The yellow Geiger tree (*Cordia lutea*) is even more tolerant of drought, but difficult to train as a tree unless started from seed. The flowers are yellow, similar to the more familiar orange Geiger, but the leaves smaller, with crenulate margins. A plus factor: unlike the orange Geiger, *C. lutea* leaves are not disfigured by Geiger tree beetles.

One final tree, the golden rain-tree, *Koelreuteria elegans* (Sapindaceae), is at present more conspicuous for the coppery pink, inflated seed capsules. Prior to this in late summer it is covered with pyramidal spikes of yellow flowers. This 30 -40' tree adapts well to poor soil providing it is free draining – root rots can be a problem. It has weak wood (prune correctly to minimize potential storm damage), and is on a watch list as possibly invasive (produces many seedling volunteers).

There are several vines are worth mentioning. The chalice vines (*Solandra* spp.) are vigorous woody vines (20 – 30') that require a sturdy trellis or pergola. The flowers are fragrant, large and cup shaped with a flared lip, pale yellow (*S. longiflora*) or golden yellow (*S. maxima*), and are in evidence summer into fall. Where pruning is necessary, cut back heavily once flowering ceases. The yellow allamanda (*Allamanda carthartica*) is less vigorous, ideal for covering a fence with bright yellow trumpet shaped flowers. A number of large flowering cultivars are available of which the 'Hendersonii' series are most often seen. Grow in full sun using enriched soil, watering during hot, dry, weather, with major pruning in early spring (caution, sap can cause dermatitis). On Miami-Dade's calcareous soil, foliar applications of manganese may be needed to correct leaf yellowing. If a more shrub like plant is desired prune more frequently, but it is easier to use the related bush (dwarf) allamanda, *A. schottii*. For a more slender woody vine, Brazilian golden vine (*Stigmaphyllon ciliatum*) provides glowing yellow, butterfly-like flowers through summer into fall. Grow in full sun with some afternoon shade.

Thryallis (*Galphimia gracilis*) is a small (3-5') shrub that blooms for much of the year with clusters of small yellow flowers. 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. A number of yellow flowering plants in the Acanthaceae are available, and will stand some light shade. Less shrub and more herbaceous perennial, all of these plants have a tendency to become leggy, and benefit from pruning after flowering. Best known is yellow candles (sometimes offered as golden shrimp plant), *Pachystachys lutea*, which produces cone-like spikes of white flowers, with showy golden yellow bracts. The true shrimp plant, *Justicia brandegeana*, is available as cv. 'Yellow Queen' with bright yellow bracts. Not as familiar is the giant yellow shrimp plant (often listed as *Barleria micans*, but probably *B. oenotheroides*), which appreciates some partial afternoon shade from hot summer sun. Related to the barlerias, *Ruttya fruticosa* - jammy mouth) is infrequently seen in local landscapes but 'Scholeseii', a yellow flowered cultivar, is sometimes available. The inflorescence is a spike, with unusual flowers having the petals fused into a protruding upper lip and a curved lower lip with a brown blister like blotch in the center. Eventually becoming a 10 -12' sprawling shrub, it can be cut low as a ground cover, or pruned into a small bush, and will take dappled

shade. Where there is more shade (bright light) try the yellow flowered cultivar of crossandra, *Crossandra infundibuliformis* cv. 'Lutea' – provide evenly moist soil.

Finally two small shrubs, the first of which, sage rose (*Turnera ulmifolia*), is quite common in local landscapes. It produces a profusion of short-lived, 2", bright yellow flowers throughout the warmer months of the year. The leaves are glossy and have a strong resinous odor when bruised. Apart from pruning to prevent it from becoming straggly, this plant requires little attention. The one caveat: a definite tendency to become weedy in the landscape. With winter approaching the final plant, *Reinwardtia indica* (yellow flax), will provide brilliant yellow flowers December to March. This is a soft stemmed, low shrub rather undistinguished until it bursts into flower early 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.

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