

A WORD OR TWO ABOUT GARDENING

The garden blues and how to enjoy them

This is the first of future articles on the topic of providing color in the landscape. Paying attention to the role of color when landscaping is an important part of creating a visually attractive yard. Foliage, flowers and fruits can all contribute color elements to the landscape, though it is flowers that are the principal focus. Various schemes have been developed as to how plants should be arranged in the landscape according to flower color, but they are based on two broad concepts: using complimentary colors to create areas of contrast, or unifying with closely related colors. This latter approach has been further refined to selecting plants of just a single basic color, such as the purple border and famous white garden both at Sissinghurst Castle (UK). Compare this with the cottage garden where the aim is to accommodate in a limited space, a diverse range of plant types differing in form and color. Although very informal in appearance, this approach to landscaping requires skill in knowing which plants to choose and where to place them, and is a challenging style to adapt to south Florida conditions. More often, the use of color in landscape designs falls in between these latter two extremes.

For this article I will discuss plants that contribute shades of blue – not the most frequently encountered of flower colors, especially in tropical plants. Blue flowering plants can create a cool, soothing effect and add a sense of depth to the landscape, in contrast to the more brightly colored plants that are used in tropical gardens. The various tints and shades of blue found in a range of more temperate climate annuals and perennials are at best short-lived inhabitants of the Miami-Dade landscape. When it comes to shrubs, old time favorites such as lilacs and hydrangeas are not suited to our tropical climate. However, rather than discussing what is not suitable, let us consider those blue flowering plants that can contribute to the local landscape. I will focus on plants with some degree of permanency, concentrating therefore on shrubs. There are several, some of which are quite familiar and provide a range of color from sky blue to deep purplish blue.

Most familiar is the ever-popular *Plumbago auriculata* (blue plumbago as opposed to the much less common and more tropical red plumbago, *P. indica*), a fairly common site in south Florida yards. The sky blue flowers blend in well next to yellow flowering shrubs such as shower of gold (*Galphimia gracilis*), or grouped near a desert cassia (*Senna polyphylla*). Use blue plumbago as a low informal hedge, or foundation plant in a sunny part of the garden – expect a sprawling shrub with a height and width of 4-5'. Blue plumbago will take some light afternoon shade, but flowers best in full sun, and can be planted in any free draining soil. Once established it is fairly drought tolerant and will reliably flower from spring through fall. Prune back any straggly growth in late winter, after which spent flowers can be removed as necessary throughout the year. There are a number of cultivars available, 'Imperial Blue' being the one most commonly seen, while 'Royal Cape' has a deep blue line down the center of each petal. There is a white variety,

P. auriculata var. *alba*, which can be used to alternate with the blue cultivars. Do not confuse *P. auriculata* with another blue plumbago, *Ceratostigma plumbaginoides*, which may be offered for sale locally. This forms an attractive ground cover, but is zoned for more temperate climates.

Only slightly less familiar and also with sky blue flowers is *Duranta erecta* known commonly as golden dewdrop or sky flower. This is a large spreading shrub, occasionally grown as a tree (see below), with drooping slender branches bearing simple, oval to elliptic, 1/2- 3" leaves often with serrated margins. The branches usually have scattered spines. The inflorescence consists of many pendent racemes of 1/4 to 1/2" light blue flowers, produced any time from spring through fall. After flowering many conspicuous, orangey yellow fruits form that attract birds, but are poisonous to humans. Golden dewdrop should be planted in full sun, is not particular as to soil providing it drains freely, and once established exhibits good drought tolerance. The shrub will take some shade but will not flower as freely. It is fast growing and can be drastically pruned – cut to the ground it will readily re-sprout. Normal pruning should be performed after flowering, and tip pruning can be used to make a bushier specimen. You may choose to remove the fruits - be aware that golden dewdrop readily produces seedling volunteers in other parts of the yard, and has naturalized in parts of Miami-Dade. It is sometimes promoted as a Florida native, but this is in doubt and it appears more likely to be an introduction from the Bahamas or Caribbean.

Recently some very attractive *D. erecta* cultivars have become available: 'Geisha Girl' has deep blue flowers with a white center and border, whilst 'Sapphire Showers' produces larger, violet blue flowers having ruffled picotee petals with a narrow white margin. These are sometimes available as standards (grown to a single stem) with a weeping habit, and can substitute for a small tree where space is limited. There are also a number of cultivars having variegated leaves, whilst 'Alba' has white flowers.

Another shrub with light blue flowers is the very attractive blue clerodendrum, *Clerodendrum ugandense*. However, unlike those described above, it is best suited to partially shaded areas of the yard. Blue clerodendrum is a sprawling shrub to more than 10', with long arching stems and toothed, bright green leaves. Individual flowers are composed of five petals, four that are light blue plus one lower petal that is a more conspicuous violet blue. This petal arrangement, together with the four long protruding stamens, gives the impression of butterflies hovering just above the foliage. Flowers are produced in terminal panicles, and appear throughout the year on new growth. Choose an area of the yard with dappled shade or part afternoon shade, and moist soil. Pruning can be done at any time to keep the plant within bounds and prevent it from becoming too leggy. Alternatively it can be allowed to sprawl and supported on a trellis or grown against a chain link fence. *C. ugandense* is one of the better behaved of the clerodendrums, with an absence of the vigorous root suckering seen in many other species.

Eranthemum pulchellum is another blue flowering shrub that is best suited to partial shade, and is often misleadingly called blue sage or Indian sage. Eranthemum is a soft wooded, multi-stemmed shrub from India growing to about 3-

4' with a spread of 5-6'. It has erect stems with dark green prominently veined shiny leaves, and from December through March 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. Remove spent flowers, 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. This is a personal favorite that although rather unassuming for much of the year (the foliage is quite attractive) definitely earns its place in the landscape for the uniquely blue, winter flowers. Flowering commences as another blue-flowered member of the Acanthaceae (*Barleria cristata*) is past its peak flower show.

Like *Eranthemum*, *B. cristata* (Philippine violet) prefers some partial shade, and moist soil, developing into a 4 x 5' semi-woody, multi-stemmed, stiff, branching shrub. *Barleria* commences flowering as days shorten, producing spikes of pale violet blue tubular flowers from mid-October through December, then on and off until spring. Pruning out dead flower heads helps to prolong flowering. More substantial pruning can be performed any time after blooming ceases up until September. This plant induces a love hate relationship – you will be captivated by the prodigious flower display, but not so taken by its habit of producing numerous seedling volunteers in the surrounding landscape. Be prepared to pay a price for the flower show when it comes time to pull up these unwanted visitors. Forms of *B. cristata* are also available with white, pink or mauve flowers.

Although dissimilar in appearance to the two shrubs just discussed, thunbergias are also part of the acanthus family. *Thunbergia grandiflora*, sky vine, is a vigorous, sometimes invasive, woody, twining vine, widely grown in the tropics where space is available. The flowers are light blue to violet and trumpet shaped - 'Augusta Blue' is a rare cultivar that is especially esteemed for its' deep blue flowers. More suitable where space is a consideration, king's mantle (*Thunbergia erecta*) grows into a 4-6' shrub with thin twining stems, dark green leaves and yellow- throated blue violet flowers. It will grow in full sun, but is best with some shade during the hottest part of the day. Avoid drastic pruning, which will reduce flowering – frequent light pruning is preferred to maintain the shrub within its' allotted space. Two other species are less often seen: *T. battiscombei* (blue boy) has similar flowers to king's mantle, but larger leaves and a more scandent habit, whilst *T. crispa* has smaller deep blue flowers and is covered in stiffer, somewhat wavy, small gray green leaves.

Less familiar in local landscapes are the iochromes, attractive, diminutive relatives of the brugmansias (angel trumpets), with *Lochroma cyaneum* (Mexican bluebell) being most readily available. It grows to form an 8' erect shrub with somewhat lax stems, attractive gray-green leaves and clusters of deep blue to purple, slender, tubular flowers. Flowering can occur on and off throughout the year but is usually best during the cooler months. Grow in full sun, but sheltered from wind (wood is brittle), and provide water during periods of drought. 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 leaf eating beetles.

Like the iochromes *Brunfelsia grandiflora* (yesterday today and tomorrow) is also in the potato family. Although the flowers are not truly blue but initially purple, bluish shades develop as they fade through lavender to white. *B. grandiflora* grows to 8-10' and benefits from some afternoon shade. Flowering occurs from winter into spring.

There are several other blue flowering shrubs for which much less information is available. *Cornutia grandifolia* is from Central America and the tall spikes of light blue flowers have earned it the common name of tropical lilac. Each erect flower spike can be up to 18" tall and consist of many hundreds of buds of which 20-30 will be fully open at any one time. Flowering occurs during the warmer months of the year, and is followed by a few purple colored drupes (fruit). Although the flowers are not fragrant, the leaves have an unusual though pleasant aroma when bruised. Individual leaves are large, more than 12 x 8", bright apple green, soft and velvety. Tropical lilac grows to about 12', and requires some shade and moist soil. It appears to perform well in Miami-Dade. Spring is a good time to prune, when any winter damage can be removed, and rising temperatures will permit rapid re-growth. This is a fast growing plant that can send up vigorous basal suckers.

There is less certainty on the long-term use of the next three blue flowering shrubs in local landscapes, but all are worth trying. *Pycnostachys dawei* (sometimes referred to as blue witches hat) is a tropical member of the mint family, and produces an unusual cone shaped inflorescence, consisting of many deep cobalt blue flowers, from late summer well into fall. This is a rapidly growing herbaceous perennial from Uganda reaching about 5' when full grown, which prefers moist enriched soil, and some afternoon shade otherwise it is prone to wilt. This is not a drought tolerant plant. *Otacanthus caeruleus* is a tropical relative of the foxglove from Brazil that grows as a 2-3' shrub producing short spikes of curved, tubular, deep violet blue flowers. The author's experience with this very attractive plant was disappointing as the foliage was severely blighted for most of the summer. It needs full sun to partial shade with moist enriched soil. *Tweedia caerulea* is a Brazilian relative of the milkweed that grows as a low straggly shrub with soft gray green leaves, and jasmine like pale blue flowers. Grow in full sun with some afternoon shade in any free draining soil, keeping it somewhat dry once established. Flowering occurs summer into fall.

Finally, although not a shrub, no discussion of blue flowering plants in the Miami-Dade landscape is complete without mention of the native lignum vitae, *Guaiacum sanctum*. I have already mentioned this small native tree in a previous article, but it is certainly worth repeating here. The overall form of the tree is appealing, with a crooked trunk and furrowed bark. The leaves are pinnately compound with three to four pairs of deep green leathery leaflets and the flowers, small with dark blue petals fading to white. Flowering occurs briefly in the spring after which attractive yellow/orange fruit appear which split to reveal a deep red aril. A slow growing, drought and salt tolerant tree requiring full sun, and a definite must for enjoying the blues in a Miami-Dade garden.