



Plants for use in a Traditional African-American Yard in Miami-Dade County

Ornamentals: Annuals/Bedding Plants

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In a previous section of this guide¹, it was noted that over the years, as African Americans in the rural South relied less on home grown food crops for sustenance, more plants were grown for their ornamental appeal. Most important in this respect were annual flowering plants, often grown in improvised containers such as disused sinks or feeding troughs, old tires or wheelbarrows. A special emphasis was placed on flowers having bold, striking colors, the display being frequently changed where possible, as new plants became available. Most of the annuals to be seen in these yards can be successfully grown in Miami-Dade during the winter months, however comparatively few can withstand this area's hot wet summer. It is worth drawing attention to the fact that many of the most popular bedding plants now grown in the US are native to the African continent, including many of those listed below.

The plants chosen are from the inventory published by Westmacott in 1992², and for this publication we have selected those grown in more than 25% of the yards for any one or more of the states surveyed. Plants are listed in order according to the frequency with which they were found. As with the vegetable garden, it is strongly advised that a soaker hose, or similar type of irrigation system, is installed when preparing the flowerbed in order to efficiently water these plants during South Florida's dry season. For a more traditional approach annuals can be grown in improvised containers (e.g. old sink, tires, wheelbarrow or feed trough), provided drainage holes are present. Hand water around the base of the plant with a wand type extension fitted with a breaker nozzle.

Petunias (*Petunia x hybrida*). A member of the Solanaceae (tomato/potato family), hundreds of varieties available, the parentage of most involving two species native to S. Brazil/Argentina, *P. axillaris* and *P. integrifolia*. There are four principal types: grandifloras with large often double flowers; multifloras with smaller flowers, but more profuse blooming; millifloras with the smallest flowers (especially useful for containers and mixed borders) and spreading petunias used as ground cover. The grandifloras are the most popular, whilst the spreading petunias are not very successful in Miami-Dade (however south Florida trials of *Petunia* 'Misty Lilac Wave' appear promising as do those for the 'Double Wave' series). Petunias can be raised from seed, which is very small and difficult to handle, and for this reason it is much easier to use transplants. Choose an area receiving at least 4-6 hours full sun, setting out plants from late November through February, 6-12" off center, using a free draining soil. Avoid wetting flowers (plant away from sprinklers) to avoid petal blight, watering around the base of the plant as the top 1" of soil dries out. Pinch out new growth

¹ See the earlier section, '[A Historical Overview of Landscape Design and Plants grown in Traditional African American Yards](#)'

² See '[Resources and Links](#)'

to encourage branching, and remove spent flowers to encourage further production. Expect petunias to last no longer than into late May.

Marigolds (*Tagetes* spp.) are native to the Americas and one of the easiest of plants to grow. There are very many varieties in different sizes and colors: African types are usually tall plants with large globe shaped flower heads in shades of yellow to orange as well as white; the popular French types are smaller plants with a wider range of colors, including some that are red, and some bi/multi-colored. Most have double flowers. The triploid hybrids, sterile crosses between the two above types, have a longer period of flowering but are more expensive. Seeds are large and can be sown directly where they are to be grown, February through December. Choose a site with full sun, good drainage and moderately fertile soil, and thin out after germination, leaving 8 –24” between plants, depending on the type being grown. Fertilize lightly to encourage blossoms rather than excess foliage. Once marigolds commence flowering, they will last for 2-3 months in the landscape (less in an especially wet summer) at which time they should be replaced. There are few pests, however excess moisture, as occurs during a S. Florida summer, is conducive to crown and root rots.

Sultana (*Impatiens walleriana* syn. *sultani*) Known also as bizzzy Lizzy or just impatiens, these E. African natives are now the top money earning bedding plant in the U.S. This is one of three species of *Impatiens* that are commonly found in cultivation, the other two being *I. balsamina* (common garden balsam, native to SE Asia) and *I. hawkeri* (New Guinea impatiens, native to New Guinea and islands in the western Pacific).

There are many cultivars of *I. walleriana*, the ‘Elfin’ series being the first of note, followed by ‘Super Elfin’ from which most of the present varieties are derived. Horticultural interest in New Guinea Impatiens developed later, one of the most successful varieties being ‘Tango’. Similar in cultural requirements to *I. walleriana*, New Guinea impatiens can survive with less shade, particularly as temperatures rise with the approach of summer. In S. Florida *I. walleriana* will grow in full sun during the winter months, if provided with adequate moisture, though dappled shade is preferable. Excess watering is the most common mistake when growing impatiens, encouraging the development of various root and stem rots.

Impatiens is normally planted from late October through February in Miami-Dade, whilst New Guinea impatiens can be planted through April and should be provided with some shade if it is to survive into the summer. It is usual to purchase transplants from a garden center when planting impatiens, since seeds are not easy to germinate. Seeds are small and therefore difficult to handle, and should be sown onto the surface of a light sterile potting mix, taking care not to cover them since they require light to germinate. For optimum germination the seed flats need to be kept at 75°F, and occasionally misted to maintain humidity. Plants also grow quite easily from cuttings. When setting out in the landscape use a rich, moist, but free draining soil, leaving 12-18” between individual plants. Avoid using too much fertilizer, as this will encourage leafy growth at the expense

of flowers, and water carefully. Water that is too cold or too warm can directly damage flower petals. A soaker hose rather than a sprinkler is the best solution to watering a bed of impatiens.

Four O'clocks (*Mirabilis jalapa*) Native from S. America to Mexico, these plants are at their best in a climate drier than that of S. Florida. They require a free draining soil and are prone to root diseases in soil that is wet for prolonged periods. Even so they will grow in Miami-Dade, having become naturalized in some areas. In the landscape they can become weedy, and difficult to eradicate unless the tuberous roots are removed. They produce attractive flowers that open in late afternoon or on cloudy days. The large seeds germinate readily and can be directly sown in the ground from late February to May.

Coleus (*Solenostemon scutellarioides*) Members of this genus are found in tropical Africa and SE Asia with *S. scutellarioides*, the parent of most coleus of horticultural interest, being native to Malaysia. It is sometimes referred to by horticulturists as *Coleus blumei* or *Coleus x hybridus* and is also known commonly as painted nettle. The plant's principal attribute is the attractively patterned often multi-colored foliage, in shades of pink, red, maroon, yellow and green. An insignificant blue flower spike is sometimes produced, and this is removed to encourage extended production of foliage. Growth will cease if the plant goes to seed.

Coleus is a perennial but is usually grown as an annual, however in subtropical climates such as Miami-Dade, it is possible to grow them for more than one season. They can be propagated from seed sown onto moist airy potting soil, then covered lightly with soil, and placed in bright light in a humid environment (i.e. cover the container with clear plastic). As the seedlings grow, thin out and transfer to individual containers to grow on for setting out in the landscape (from March to September). Coleus can also be grown from cuttings, or transplants are available at most garden centers. One advantage of growing from seed, especially a mix, is the ability to grow plants having foliage with a much greater range of colors and patterns. A mix is especially useful where space is limited as in a container.

In southern Florida coleus benefits from some light shade, especially during the hottest part of the day, and requires moist but never wet soil. Excess shade produces weak, leggy plants. There are some newer cultivars such as 'Pineapple', 'Alabama Sunset', 'Saturn' and the Solar series that are much more tolerant of direct sun.

Sunflower (*Helianthus* spp.) These large imposing plants are native to N. America and are relatively undemanding in most situations. Sunflowers can grow to 6-8', however there are dwarf varieties that grow to 4' or less. Some varieties, such as 'Big Smile', 'Pacino' and 'Teddy Bear' (double flower) can be grown in small containers. Sunflower varieties can be either single stem or branching. Non-branching varieties include 'Velvet Beauty' (deep red), 'Holiday' (a dwarf type), 'Music-Box' (dwarf with mixed colors) and 'Moonwalker' (pale yellow). Branching varieties include 'Chianti Hybrid' (deep wine red), 'Velvet

Queen' (rich deep red), 'Prado Red' (a uniformly dark red) and 'Valentine' (creamy lemon yellow).

In south Florida sunflowers should be planted between November and February and will die out once the summer rainy season commences. Choose a site that receives full sun and sow seeds directly into the ground, having previously enriched the soil with some organic matter such as well-rotted compost. Once the seeds germinate insert a stake into the ground to support the medium or tall varieties. Fertilize lightly and water when the top 1" of soil dries out. The tallest varieties are rather rank looking, but don't look out of place at the back of the winter vegetable garden as a source of color. The green flower buds are sometimes cooked and eaten. Sunflowers are also grown commercially for their edible seeds, and select varieties are available for this purpose. Saved seeds usually do not produce attractive plants, and fresh seed should be purchased for each new growing season. Since sunflowers concentrate lead in their roots there is interest in planting them in inner-city areas where lead-contaminated soil is often a problem.

Portulaca or **Moss Rose** (*Portulaca grandiflora*). An extremely colorful, low growing plant with attractive fleshy foliage, this S. American native can be set out from March to August, using a free draining soil and a site that receives full sun. Moss rose is well suited to thin, low fertility soils that exhibit poor water retention such as the limestone of South Miami-Dade.

Many cultivars are now available in a full range of colors including white, pinks, reds, yellow, orange, gold and fuchsia, and some are bi- or multi-colored. Those with double blooms are especially showy. Plants will re-seed, however the flowers produced are of poor quality. Moss rose grows easily from seed (seed tapes simplify planting), but flower for a comparatively brief period, after which they should be removed. Fresh seed can be sown about every 6 weeks to ensure a succession of flowering plants. Transplants of moss rose are usually readily available, as are those of the closely related purslane (*Portulaca oleracea*). The newer cultivars of purslane, such as the large flowered Eubi types are available in mixed colors (yellow, red, pink and purple) and are more permanent landscape features than moss rose. The leaves of *P. oleracea* are edible with a mildly acidic taste, being rich in vitamins A and C, iron and ω -3 fatty acids.

Salvia (Sage, *Salvia splendens*) The *Salvia* spp. are of cosmopolitan distribution, with *S. splendens* (native to Brazil) being the most common species used as a bedding plant. This species is now available in very many colors other than the original red, with cultivars having purple, pink, white and salmon flowers, as well as bicolored and striped varieties. Although classed as a perennial, it is usually grown as an annual and can be set out from late February to November in S. Florida. *S. splendens* must have a free draining soil, in full sun, though some dappled shade for part of the day is acceptable. During extended periods of wet weather disease can become a problem. To ensure repeat flowering, exhausted flower spikes need to be removed. Do not over fertilize as salvias are adapted to grow on poor soils – an application of a slow release fertilizer (i.e.14/14/14) after

planting should be sufficient. Garden sage, *Salvia officinalis* is grown for use as an herb, and is best planted as a winter annual in south Florida.

Geranium (*Pelargonium x hortum*). Although pelargoniums are popularly referred to as geraniums, true geraniums belong to the genus *Geranium*. While *Geranium* spp. are widely distributed, most pelargoniums are native to S. Africa. Zonal geraniums, or more correctly pelargoniums (so called because of the patterning on the foliage), are those mostly widely used as annual bedding plants in Miami-Dade. Flowers, which are borne in umbels, can be single or double in various shades of red, pink, orange and white. Many different cultivars have been developed including the Dynamo Series, Orbit Series, Ringo 2000 Series and the tetraploid 'Tetra Scarlet' and 'Freckles', these latter producing stronger plants with larger flowers. Pelargoniums should be planted from November to February in South Florida choosing a predominantly sunny site having a gritty free draining soil.

It is usual to purchase transplants since raising pelargoniums from seed requires special attention to growing conditions. Seed is available, that from F1 hybrid varieties produces the most attractive flowers, but it is more expensive than that for most other bedding plants. Pelargoniums have a hard seed coat that inhibits germination, and the seed needs to be scarified (scratched) before sowing. Most commercial seed, especially if it is pelleted has already been treated to ensure reliable germination. Successful germination of pelargoniums is also highly dependent on avoiding fluctuations in soil temperature, a constant 70-75°F being ideal. Once they have germinated, development of the seedling requires maintenance of even levels of soil moisture.

In the landscape, water around the base of the plants when the soil surface dries out since wilted plants rapidly lose foliage and become unattractive. Partial afternoon shade during the hottest part of the year is beneficial. Excess shade inhibits flowering and causes plants to become leggy. Apply a slow release fertilizer (i.e. 10/10/10) at the time of planting, and then at 8-week intervals. Although perennial, pelargoniums do not usually thrive under the hot, humid conditions of a typical S. Florida summer and usually need to be removed by July. They are well adapted to container culture, and are particularly attractive in large planters.

Sweet William (*Dianthus barbatus*) and **Pinks** (*Dianthus chinensis*).

Although sweet William figured most prominently in the gardens surveyed by Westmacott, pinks are found more frequently in Miami-Dade. Carnations (original wild type *Dianthus caryophyllus*) are also popular as annual bedding plants in local gardens. In the wild *D. barbatus* is a biennial, however several cultivars have been developed as annuals. Most *Dianthus* spp. originated in southern Europe and the Mediterranean basin, though *D. chinensis* is originally from China. They are noted for the sweetly fragrant blooms, available in a range of bright colors (red, pink, yellow, lavender and purple), some with bi-colored or picotee flowers.

Sweet Williams should be planted from February to March, and can be expected to survive in the landscape up to May at which time they will need to be removed.

Pinks can be set out from November to February, and should survive until June, whilst carnations are best planted between November and January and will probably need to be removed toward the end of April. Dianthus require a free draining soil, amended with some added organic matter if sandy, and should be planted 6-12" off center in a site that receives some light afternoon shade.

Dianthus spp. are susceptible to crown and root rots so exercise caution when watering. Mulching is not necessary and can encourage disease problems, especially if it impedes the flow of air around the base of the stems. Allow the top 1/2" of soil to dry out between watering, and apply a slow releases fertilizer every 6-8 weeks. Remove spent blooms to stimulate further flower production.

Zinnias These colorful plants are native to the Americas, more especially Mexico, with most of the commercially important cultivars being derived from *Zinnia elegans* and *Zinnia haagaena*. Zinnias are available in practically all colors except blue, and various flower types, from heirloom daisy like, dahlia like pom-pom or cactus flowered. Plants range in height from 5-6", as in the semi-double Thumbelina mix, through the intermediate sized and tall series. The latter plants can grow up to 3' and should be staked.

Zinnias adapt well to container culture, make excellent cut flowers, and have the added advantage in south Florida of being one of the few annuals that lasts well into the summer. Choose a site in full sun with a free draining soil (enrich with some organic matter if necessary), and space transplants at 1-3' intervals. Zinnias are easy to grow from seed, sown directly in the ground at a depth of no more than 1/2", at intervals of 4-5". Once seedlings emerge and develop true leaves, thin out to an interval appropriate for the mature size of the cultivar. Pinch young plants to encourage branching, and remove spent blooms before they go to seed. Zinnias thrive in full sun but should be watered regularly in the absence of rain, keeping water off the foliage.

Powdery mildew can be a serious problem during periods of moderately hot dry weather, with leaf spotting and blight during extended rainy spells. Several cultivars are available with resistance to powdery mildew, including the Profusion series, 'Orange Star', Pinwheel series, 'Oklahoma' and Benary's Giant Series. 'Crystal White' is a cultivar of *Z. augustifolia*, native to the southern U.S, which has small daisy-like flowers, and is also resistant to powdery mildew.

Bush zinnia (*Melampodium paludosum*) is a less showy though hardy relative of the true zinnias that is continuously covered with butter yellow 1" daisy-like flowers. Sometimes listed as African zinnias, melampodiums are native to N. America. The plant's main attribute for Miami-Dade gardeners is an ability to fully survive the heat and rain of a south Florida summer, succeeding on poor soil with little maintenance. They exhibit better resistance to powdery mildew than true zinnias. For containers choose one of the more compact varieties such as 'Million Gold, (less than 1'), whilst for landscaping taller varieties are available such as 'Showstar' or 'Medallion'. *Meleampodium* readily forms seed and self-sows, therefore care needs to be taken to prevent the plant from becoming weedy in other parts of the yard.

Snapdragon (*Antirrhinum majus* - native to southern Europe/Mediterranean). This is a short-lived perennial that is grown as an annual. There are many varieties available ranging from the dwarf Tom Thumb and Floral Carpet series, the intermediate sized Monarch series to the tall Liberty, Princess, and Rocket series. These latter plants require staking.

Snapdragons are easy to grow from seed: sow directly on to moistened soil and leave uncovered since they require light to germinate. In south Florida set out plants in the landscape from November to February in full sun. Transplants are often locally available. Snapdragons are fairly tolerant of alkaline soil, however enrich native soil with a small amount of organic matter to improve the water holding capacity. They are at their best during cool temperatures.

Periwinkle (*Catharanthus roseus*). Also known as Madagascar periwinkle, to denote its origin and distinguish it from the related more temperate *Vinca* spp. Madagascar periwinkle is a small, low growing, bushy perennial that is usually grown as an annual. In south Florida where plants are not killed by frost, *C. roseus* can survive several seasons, and often re-seeds. There are a number of different cultivars all producing a continuous display of either white, rosy pink or mauve flowers. These range from the spreading 4" Carpet series to the 2' tall 'Parasol' variety with 2" wide white flowers. Providing a well-drained site is chosen in full sun, these are easy plants to grow, being tolerant of infertile soils and drought. Restrict applications of fertilizer to a minimum as too much will inhibit flower production – *Catharanthus* thrive on poor infertile soils. There are no insect pests of importance, however where soil moisture remains high, plants are very prone to develop stem and root rots.

Plants are best set out between November and May spaced 1-3' off center, and are also easy to start from seed.

Dusty Miller (*Senecio cineraria*) This Mediterranean native has small yellow flowers, but it is the attractive, lacy, silvery foliage for which it is usually grown. Several cultivars of Dusty Miller are available and these eventually grow into shrubby 2-3' plants, and under optimum conditions (dry, warm, sunny summers) they can be grown as perennials. Because of the hot, wet, humid summers typical of south Florida, it is better grown as an annual in Miami-Dade. Plants can be set out from late October through March, but will probably be unattractive by July when they should be removed from the landscape. Choose a site that receives full sun, preferably with a sandy free draining soil and water as needed only until established. Transplants can also be raised in flats by spreading seed directly on the soil surface.

The silvery gray/green foliage of Dusty Miller is an excellent foil to the brightly colored flowers in a traditional African American flower garden.

Begonias (*Begonia semperflorens*, native to Brazil) The list of annuals in Westmacott's survey includes an entry for "Begonia spp.", but does not specifically mention the type of begonia, of which there are many. The wax begonias (B. Semperflorens-Cultorem Hybrids) also known as fibrous rooted begonias are the group most widely used as summer bedding plants in the South,

and are winter/early spring favorites in Miami-Dade. Plants are usually distinguished on the basis of their foliage: bronze leaved varieties include the Victory and more compact Cocktail series, whilst the Challenger series has green and bronze foliage and the Ambassador and Prelude series green leaves, the latter being well suited to rain and heat. Flowers come in white, shades of pink or red, with some bi-colored (picotees). Wax begonias are more successful here outdoors than the tuberous begonias.

Tuberous begonias produce extremely showy flowers in a wide range of colors, but are poorly suited to south Florida conditions. They require almost 12 hours of daylight to flower reliably, and the long days of summer in Miami-Dade are far too hot and humid for tuberous begonias. In winter, with shorter days, they would have to be grown as indoor container plants, where they can be exposed to additional artificial lighting in an attempt to induce more reliable flowering. Rex begonias, grown for the stunning range of foliage colors and patterns, adapt well to south Florida conditions if given sufficient shade.

Wax begonias are under utilized in the Miami-Dade landscape, particularly since they are more drought tolerant and less susceptible to disease than the more frequently seen impatiens. Transplants can be set out in South Florida from October through March in a site that will receive some slight shade, particularly during the summer months. The bronze leaved varieties are better adapted to sun than those with green leaves, and for both too much shade will produce leggy plants and reduce flowering. It is advisable to enrich the soil with organic matter making sure that it remains free draining, after which plants can be set out 6 or 12" apart for container and landscape respectively. Apply a light application of a slow release fertilizer at the time of planting - wax begonias do not require much fertilizer. Whilst wax begonias are more resistant to drought than other begonias, it is best to water them so that the soil remains just moist. Although grown as an annual, wax begonias are perennial and can be maintained through the summer, though flowering is not as prolific. In the fall wax begonias should be pruned back to encourage new growth and flower production.

Pests are not normally serious, though disease problems can occur during prolonged periods of warm dry weather (powdery mildew) or wet humid conditions where there is poor air circulation (blights and leaf spots).

Begonia grandis (hardy begonia) is an heirloom species of tuberous begonia that has been a favorite in many southern gardens, but is not recommended for south Florida.

Wild Poinsettia (*Euphorbia cyathophora* syn. *Poinsettia cyathophora*) This less showy relative of the cultivated poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherimma*) is indigenous to much of the eastern and southern U.S. growing as an annual except in warm winter areas such as peninsular Florida where it can persist as a perennial. Sometimes also known as "Fire on the mountain", it produces colorful red bracts similar to the cultivated poinsettia, but far less striking. This is an easy plant to grow and remains colorful for most of the year, however it readily becomes weedy and invasive.

By late June into July most of the above listed annuals should have been removed, at which time color in the landscape will have to be provided by some of the [flowering perennials](#) and [shrubs](#) discussed in subsequent sections of the guide.