



Wild petunia

Photo by Ron and Diane Bynum



Gulf fritillary on Wild petunia

Photo by Ron and Diane Bynum

Wild petunia (*Ruellia* spp.) is an easy-to-grow, lavender- to blue-flowered native that works well in most conditions. It is endemic to the eastern United States, where its range extends from New Jersey southward and west to Texas. In Florida, it is found in sandhills, flatwoods and moist to wet hammocks in about 52 counties. There are five species of *Ruellia* native to Florida, but *Ruellia caroliniensis* is the most common, both in the wild and commercially. Other species include Ciliate wild petunia (*Ruellia ciliosa*) and Thicket wild petunia (*Ruellia succulenta*), endemic to South Florida. A non-native species of *Ruellia* is commonly available for purchase but should not be used as it is invasive. (See Caution.)

Description

Wild petunia is a long-lived perennial that can attain a height of 12 to 18 inches. Its 5-petaled blooms are tubular, grow to about 1 to 2 inches, and appear in clusters along multi-branched stems. It resembles the common garden petunia, although they are not related. Its simple leaves are green with an ovate to elliptic shape and are oppositely arranged on stems. *R. caroliniensis* is easily distinguished from other *Ruellia* species by the long, pointed sepals and bracts that surround the flower's base.

Butterflies and bees

Several butterfly species, including the White peacock, Malachite and Mangrove buckeye, gather nectar from Wild petunia. It is a host for the Common buckeye. The blue corollas attract a variety of bees, including bumble bees, leafcutter bees and honey bees.

Wild petunia's showy flowers last only a day, but successional blooms keep the plant looking fresh with continuous flowers spring through fall. In warmer parts of the state, it may bloom year-round with smaller flowers. In colder climates, Wild petunia may die back in winter and return in spring.

Planting

Wild petunia does well in a mixed wildflower bed of plants and grasses. In North Florida, it is not recommended for a mass planting as it will be a patch of stems during the winter.

Plant Wild petunia 12 to 15 inches apart, or grow it in a hanging basket or large, well-drained container. Wild petunia is one of the few wildflowers that will bloom in partial to slightly denser shade.

Seeds

Seeds are generally not commercially available. To grow this plant from seed, collect mature capsules in a paper bag in mid- to late summer. Seeds gradually ripen on the plant over a period of weeks, so visit plants several times to check the capsules. They will turn from bright green to brown when mature.

Plants

Plants are widely available from native nurseries in various pot sizes, and can be planted throughout the growing season.

Stem cuttings are also an easy way to propagate it. Take 3- to 4-inch cuttings in the summer from flexible stems. Plants root easily in 3-4 weeks.

Care

Wild petunia may need trimming halfway through its growing season to promote

new growth and blooms. Remove 3-4 internodes (4-6 inches) with scissors or clippers. Annual pruning may be required to remove old stems.

Wild petunia is a prolific self-seeder and may form colonies over time. (Like other members of the Acanthaceae family, its mature seed capsules will explode open, sending seeds far from the parent plant.) Plants have a strong root system, making them easy to transplant.

Site conditions

This plant adapts well to varied sun and soil moisture conditions. It will thrive in a moderate-to-dry sunny location but also tolerates shade and even wet, mucky soils. Establishing Wild petunia in shadier locations will result in plants that appear lanky with fewer blooms. Plants have some salt tolerance.

Hardiness zones

Wild petunia is best suited for zones 8A–10B.



Wild Petunia is best in a mixed planting.

Photo by Mary Ellen Gotke

Although the nursery industry offers some sterile non-native *Ruellia*, the widely grown Mexican petunia (*Ruellia simplex*; synonyms *R. brittoniana* and *R. tweediana*) should be avoided as it may reproduce via underground rhizomes. As a Category I invasive exotic species, it has spread into municipal and natural areas, displacing native species and changing community structures or ecological functions.

