# **NATIVE PLANTS** for Florida Gardens

### STACEY MATRAZZO AND NANCY BISSETT

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## INTRODUCTION

When most people think of Florida, they think of sunshine, palm trees, and sandy beaches. But take another look and you'll see the state is home to an incredible array of flora and fauna and a wide range of biological communities. In fact, Florida is one of the most diverse states in the country, with more than 4,100 plant species documented, including more ancient species and families of plants than any other state.

#### WHY NATIVE?

Native plants are paramount to healthy ecosystems. In both natural and urban landscapes, they provide vital food and cover for native wildlife, enrich soil and control erosion, sequester carbon, reduce air and water pollution, and help maintain a healthy environment.

What makes a plant "native"? In general, a native plant is any species indigenous to or naturally occurring (without human intervention) in a particular region. In Florida, native plants are further designated as species that were present at the time of European colonization. This period marks the genesis of the state's changing landscape, when land was cleared for settlement and new species from around the world were beginning to be introduced. It is also when our first botanical records were created.

Florida has about 2,800 native plant species, which have acclimated to our state's unique soil and climate conditions over thousands of years. They have evolved adaptations that help them endure drought, salt, hurricane winds, and seasonal climate fluctuations, making them better suited than nonnative species for survival in Florida's harsh environments.

Native plants can transform your landscape into a living ecosystem. As Florida's natural lands succumb to increasing development, a thriving urban habitat can serve as a necessary connector between fragmented natural areas, creating pathways for birds, pollinators, and other animals. Even the smallest native garden can provide essential resources for wildlife. With native plants, your landscape can be more than just a pretty face. It can provide ornamental beauty that also supports wildlife and a healthy environment.

#### **Invasive Species**

Exotic species are those that have been intentionally or inadvertently introduced to areas outside their natural ranges. Exotics whose populations have aggressively expanded into natural areas due to the absence of natural controls are considered invasive. These species disrupt natural communities and displace or even

### **QUICK-REFERENCE KEY**

Look for these symbols to help you select plants that are suitable for your geographic location, soil, and light conditions. They will also help you choose plants based on other factors such as color and season of bloom.

BLOOM COLOR $\overbrace{Vhite}$  $\overbrace{Orange}$  $\overbrace{Oie}$  $\overbrace{Oiee}$  $\overbrace{Oiee$  $\overbrace{Oieee$  $\overbrace{Oieee}$  $\overbrace{Oieee$  $\overbrace{Oieee$  $\overbrace{$ 



Wildflowers

ADDING NATIVE WILDFLOWERS to your landscape can create a pleasing aesthetic while providing natural resources for wildlife. Wildflowers are critical for nourishing pollinators and act as host plants for emerging larvae. Birds savor those insects as well as wildflower seeds. Butterflies, bees, wasps, flies, and other beneficial insects visit wildflowers for nectar and pollen. Some even use hollow stems as nesting sites. Group wildflowers to add a mosaic of color and texture to your landscape.

### **HAMMOCK SNAKEROOT** (Ageratina jucunda)

Hammock snakeroot is a low growing, herbaceous perennial with a woody base. It is found in sandhills, dry pinelands, hammocks, and upland mixed woodlands throughout Florida's peninsula and eastern Panhandle. Its blooms attract



a variety of butterflies, including hairstreaks, Julias, skippers, and crescents. Bees and hummingbirds like it, too, but the plant is poisonous to both humans and livestock if ingested.

Like other members of the Eupatorieae tribe of the aster family, Hammock snakeroot's flowers have no ray florets—only disk florets are present. They are white, tubular, and born in flat-topped clusters on branched stems. Leaves are petiolate and deltoid to narrowly rhombic with serrate margins. They are oppositely arranged and often drooping.

The species epithet *jucunda* is from the Latin *jucundus*, which means "pleasing" or "delightful." Perhaps that's because the sprinkling of its blooms looks like a fairy dusted the landscape.

FAMILY: Asteraceae (aster, composite, or daisy family)

NATIVE RANGE: Eastern Panhandle and throughout peninsular Florida

LIFESPAN: Perennial

BLOOM SEASON: Late summer through early winter

GROWTH HABIT: 2–3' tall; usually taller than wide

PROPAGATION: Hammock snakeroot easily germinates from seed and can germinate in the landscape during the winter months if moisture is adequate. Let the seed ripen and fall naturally or harvest to plant in other areas.

PLANTING: Plants are generally available in 1-gallon containers. Find spaces in

well-drained soils either alone or mixed with other plants in a naturalistic planting. A 24-inch spacing is adequate.

CARE: As in all well-drained soils, plants may suffer through extended spring droughts. After blooming in the fall, they may look ragged; plants may be trimmed back any time before spring to give a fresher look.

SITE CONDITIONS: Full sun to partial shade; moist, well-drained soils

HARDINESS: Zones 8A-11A

GARDENTIPS: Hammock snakeroot makes a nice low shrub border, but also works well in naturalistic plantings and in mixed beds. Its blooms are especially delightful when paired with other flowering species.

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## **SWAMP MILKWEED** (Asclepias incarnata, A. perennis)

Swamp milkweed—sometimes known as Pink milkweed and White milkweed—are striking wildflowers that make an excellent addition to moist, sunny landscapes. Both are great for attracting butterflies and other pollinating insects. (2)
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Milkweed is the larval host plant for Monarch, Queen, and Soldier butterflies. It also is an important nectar source for these and other butterflies, including Pipevine, Spicebush, and Eastern swallowtails. Native sweat bees, leafcutter bees, and yellow-faced bees forage the flowers for pollen and nectar.

Asclepias flowers consist of petals that reflex backward and an upright crown (corona) of crested hoods that are often mistaken for petals. A. incarnata (pictured, top) flowers range in color from light pink to rose. Its leaves are lance- to linear-shaped and up to 6 inches long. A. perennis (pictured, bottom) produces white to pale pink flowers. It is a shorter, more delicate species of milkweed with smaller flowerheads and lance-shaped leaves. In both species, the small, flat seeds are born in follicles that split to release seeds. Attached to each seed is a silky white pappus that catches the wind and aids in dispersal.

#### FAMILY: Apocynaceae (dogbane family)

NATIVE RANGE: *A. incarnata* occurs in Central and South Florida; *A. perennis* is native to Central and North Florida.

#### LIFESPAN: Perennial

BLOOM SEASON: Summer and fall (A. *incarnata*); spring through fall (A. *perennis*)

GROWTH HABIT: 4–6' tall but not as wide (*A. incarnata*); 1–2' tall and almost as wide (*A. perennis*)

PROPAGATION: Collect seeds from plants once follicles split. Germinate on top of soil with a light mix barely covering seeds. Seeds can be stored in the refrigerator for a couple of months.

PLANTING: Plants are typically available in 4-inch, 6-inch, and 1-gallon containers. Space 2 to 3 feet apart in clusters of three or more plants.

CARE: Light annual pruning may be necessary to remove dead stems. Aphids frequently attack milkweeds; remove them manually to avoid pesticide use SITE CONDITIONS: *A. incarnata* does best in full sun but may adjust to partial shade. *A. perennis* can tolerate more shade. Both require moist to wet, welldrained soils.

HARDINESS: *A. incarnata* is suited for zones 8A–10B; *A. perennis* does best in zones 8A–9B.

GARDENTIPS: Swamp milkweed works best in mixed butterfly and wildflower gardens planted along pond edges or similar moist sites. They can tolerate short periods of drought once established, but soil should be kept moist. Both species do well in containers.

CAUTION: Do not confuse this plant with the nonnative Tropical milkweed (*Asclepias curassavica*), which is typically sold at retail garden centers. Tropical milkweed does not die back in winter in Florida (as do native milkweeds) and can encourage overwintering in adult Monarchs. It also is linked the transmission of the *Ophryocystis elektroscirrha* (OE) infection.

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# Flowering Vines

FLOWERING VINES ARE A GREAT WAY to add vertical interest to your landscape, particularly when surface space is limited. They are typically fast-growing plants that clamber, cling, and climb their way to the sky in search of sunlight. This rambling growth habit forms a dense network of stems and leaves that provides nesting habitat and protective cover for wildlife. Many vines produce nectar-rich tubular flowers that attract hummingbirds and large insects, and juicy berries that offer a tasty treat for birds and other wildlife. Vines can't support themselves naturally, so they typically seek out trees, shrubs, or other natural supports on which to climb. When adding vines to your garden, place them at the base of a fence, trellis, or other structure, where they will be supported and allowed to freely spread. Their climbing habit enables them to take over an area quite quickly, which may be challenging to manage. However, most vines can be pruned to control their growth and maintain a desired size or form. Some also make attractive groundcovers.

## **TRUMPET CREEPER** (*Campsis radicans*)

Trumpet creeper is a high-climbing woody vine so named because its showy flowers are trumpet-shaped. It is found in moist woodlands and thickets throughout Central and North Florida. Flowers bloom year-round, peaking in spring and summer. They are very attractive to hummingbirds.

Trumpet creeper's flowers are long, tubular, and reddish orange with a yellowish throat. They are born in terminal cymes. Leaves are dark green, pinnately compound, and fernlike. Leaflets, which number at least seven per leaf, are ovate to lanceolate with serrated margins and pointed tips. Leaves and leaflets are oppositely arranged. The plant climbs via aerial rootlets. Tendrils are lacking, and the stem is woody and robust. Trumpet creeper's fruit is a long (3 to 5 inches) bean-like capsule bearing many winged seeds.

Flowers are very similar in appearance to the flowers of its cousin, Crossvine (*Bignonia capreolata*). The latter has visible tendrils and its compound leaves have only two leaflets.

The species epithet *radicans* comes from the Latin *radix*, or "root," and refers to the plant's motility via its aerial roots. There are only two species in the *Campsis* genus—the other is Chinese trumpet vine (*C. grandiflora*), a native of East Asia.

FAMILY: Bignoniaceae (bignonia family)

NATIVE RANGE: Central and North Florida

LIFESPAN: Perennial

BLOOM SEASON: Year-round, with peak bloom in late spring and summer

GROWTH HABIT: 30'+ long

PROPAGATION: Cuttings, division, seed

PLANTING: Plants are available in 1- and 3-gallon pot sizes. Find a place where plenty of sun exposure will produce many blooms. If placed on a trellis or fence, space plants about 3 feet apart. A freestanding, open-canopy tree, such as a pine that will permit plenty of filtered sunlight, also can be used. CARE: Although Trumpet creeper does not need special care, it may need to be cut back frequently or trimmed to shape if it is confined to a specific area.

SITE CONDITIONS: Full sun to partial shade; moist sandy, loamy, or clay soils

#### HARDINESS: Zones 8A-9B

GARDEN TIPS: Because of its fast growth rate and potential size, Trumpet creeper may be difficult to control in a small setting. It is best used in a naturalistic landscape or, with persistent pruning, trained on a fence or large trellis. Do not let this plant grow on a house or other structure, as its aerial roots can damage wood, brick, stone, and stucco. It is deciduous in the north, while generally evergreen in the south.

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Grasses

NATIVE GRASSES GIVE TEXTURE and movement to a landscape—even a gentle breeze will cause them to sway and flow in graceful gestures. They are resilient, versatile, and have an understated beauty that adds elegance to any landscape. They also provide valuable resources to wildlife. Bunchgrasses, in particular, provide excellent cover and nesting habitat for birds, which also feast on seeds and the insects that subsist on the grass. Use native grasses as specimen plants or to fill open areas around other perennials. Intersperse bunchgrasses with tall wildflowers to help support them and keep them erect, or plant bunchgrasses of the same species en masse for greater impact.

## **BLUESTEM** (Andropogon ternarius, A. virginicus var. glaucus)

Bluestems are robust clump-forming grasses found primarily in pineland, sandhill, and scrub habitats throughout Florida. Many species occur in Florida, and their nomenclature

continues to change. Splitbeard bluestem (*Andropogon ternarius*) and Chalky bluestem (*A. virginicus* var. *glaucus*, recently renamed *A. capillipes*) are two that are easily incorporated into landscapes. Bluestems offer cover, and the seeds provide food for a variety of birds and small animals.

Bluestem flowers are born in terminal racemes that vary in color from gold to white to silver, depending on the species, and are generally covered in soft hairs. Leaves are long and narrow with flattened leaf sheaths. The leaves of Splitbeard bluestem are flat, green on the upper surface and blue underneath. Chalky bluestem (pictured) leaves are covered in a chalky white coating, giving the plant a bluish or silvery color. Bluestems are bunchgrasses, meaning the leaves are born in tight clusters.

The genus name *Andropogon* is from the Greek *andro*, or "male," and *pogon*, or "beard," and refers to the bearded appearance of the inflorescence. Bluestems are sometimes known as "bearded grasses."

#### FAMILY: Poaceae (grass family)

NATIVE RANGE: Nearly throughout Florida

LIFESPAN: Perennial

BLOOM SEASON: Late summer and fall

GROWTH HABIT: 1–11/2' tall and 1–2' wide; 3–6' tall when in bloom

PROPAGATION: Division, seed

PLANTING: Plants are available in liners or 1-gallon pots. Space them about 18 inches apart or mixed with wildflowers.

CARE: Allow spent flowering stems to remain through winter to provide interest in the garden as well as seeds for small birds. Cut back in spring before new growth emerges. SITE CONDITIONS: Full sun to partial shade; dry to moist, well-drained sandy soils

HARDINESS: Zones 8A-10B

GARDEN TIPS: When used in a mixed planting with brightly colored wildflowers, bluestem grasses can provide a dramatic contrast. They also work well as accent plants or in masses.

NOTE: Some bluestems, such as Bushy bluestem (*A. glomeratus*), often are seen in ditches and wet disturbed areas, and Broomsedge bluestem (*A. virginicus* var. *virginicus*) is found in almost any disturbed spot. They will readily reseed if permitted and are not recommended for gardens.

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# Trees and Shrubs

TREES AND SHRUBS ARE ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS of a healthy, sustainable landscape. They host a variety of microhabitats, providing food and cover for myriad birds, small mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and insects. Shrubs can be a welcome addition as a privacy screen or buffer, while a tree can act as a centerpiece, giving your landscape a distinctive character. Many trees provide year-round interest with evergreen foliage or fall colors, vivid spring flowers, and abundant fruit. Shade trees can help lower electric bills by keeping your house cooler, particularly when planted on the east or west side of your home. Think carefully about the size, shape, and growth habit of trees and shrubs before planting to ensure they have the space they need to thrive.

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## **RED MAPLE** (Acer rubrum)

Red maple is one of the most striking and common trees found in Florida's freshwater swamps and wetlands. For much of the year, its crown is covered in a scarlet hue—its flowers, fruits, and, for part of the year, leaves are all varying



degrees of red. The tree provides food and cover for birds and other small wildlife. The foliage is food for many caterpillars, including the Rosy maple moth.

Red maple's showy but small flowers are red and born in hanging clusters in the leaf axils before new leaves emerge. Its distinctive leaves are simple, palmate, and three- to five-lobed with toothed margins. The upper leaf surface is green, while the underside is covered in whitish hairs, giving it a silvery tinge. Both the leaf stalk and veins are red. In the fall, when the first cold weather hits, the entire leaf turns red or reddish yellow. The trunk is generally straight with smooth gray bark. Seeds are born in two-winged samaras. The samara's papery coating allows the seed to be carried on the wind like a spinning helicopter, aiding in distribution far from the parent tree.

Red maple seeds are edible to humans but may be bitter. (Boiling them can lessen the bitterness.) Although maple syrup can be extracted from Red maple, it is not as plentiful or flavorful as that of its cousin Sugar maple (*Acer saccharum*).

#### FAMILY: Sapindaceae (soapberry family)

NATIVE RANGE: Nearly throughout Florida, except Hendry and Miami-Dade counties and the Keys

LIFESPAN: Perennial

BLOOM SEASON: Winter and early spring

GROWTH HABIT: 30'-50'+ tall

PROPAGATION: Seed

PLANTING: Plants are widely available in 1- to 200-gallon containers.

CARE: Red maple may produce many seedlings, but most do not mature and need not be weeded.

SITE CONDITIONS: Full sun to light shade; rich, moist to wet, well- to poorly drained soils

#### HARDINESS: Zones 8A-10B

GARDEN TIPS: Red maple is one of the first signs of spring, often flowering in January in Central Florida and gradually later to the north. Its attractive foliage and regular form make it a desirable specimen tree for moist or wet sites. Though a wetland plant, it can be used on moist sites or on drier, somewhat shady sites. The tree may be dioecious, meaning male and female flowers are born on separate plants, or monoecious, with male and female flowers on the same plant.

CAUTION: Many cultivars have been developed, but none are from Florida and are unlikely to perform well here.

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### MARLBERRY (Ardisia escallonioides)

Marlberry is an evergreen shrub found in coastal strands and hammocks and pine rocklands throughout Central and South Florida. It blooms and fruits intermittently throughout the year, with peak blooming summer through fall.



Marlberry's abundant fruit is enjoyed by birds and small animals and is also edible to humans. Its dense foliage provides significant cover for wildlife.

Marlberry's fragrant flowers may be creamy white or pinkish, have distinct yellow anthers, and are born in dense terminal or axillary panicles. The plant's thick, glossy, dark green leaves are lanceolate to elliptic and tend to reflex upward. They are petiolate and alternately arranged. Leaf margins are entire. Bark is smooth, thin, and whitish gray. Fruits begin as small green to reddish drupes that turn shiny and black when mature. Each fruit bears a single hard seed.

The genus name *Ardisia* is from the Greek *árdis*, or "point of an arrow," and may refer to the flowers' anthers or corolla lobes. The species epithet *escalloniodes* is derived from the genus *Escallonia* (named after the 18th century Spanish bot-anist Antonio Escallón y Flórez) and the Greek *eîdos*, meaning "resemblance" or "likeness."

FAMILY: Myrsinaceae (myrtle or eucalyptus family)

NATIVE RANGE: Peninsula from Flagler, Pasco, and Polk counties south into the Keys

LIFESPAN: Perennial

**BLOOM SEASON: Year-round** 

GROWTH HABIT: 3-18'+ tall

PROPAGATION: Harvest seed from ripe fruit and sow in moist, shaded soils.

PLANTING: Available in 3-gallon and larger containers. Space 3 to 6 feet apart, depending on desired growth habit.

CARE: Marlberry is easy to trim to a preferred size and shape.

SITE CONDITIONS: Full sun to partial shade; moist, well-drained organic, sandy, or calcareous soils

HARDINESS: Zones 9A-11A

GARDENTIPS: Marlberry is often overlooked as a landscape plant, but this shrub to small tree is attractive and versatile. It works well as a specimen plant, as a buffer, and in mass plantings.

CAUTION: Marlberry may be confused with its nonnative cousins, Coral ardisia (*Ardisia crenata*) and Shoebutton ardisia (*Ardisia elliptica*). Coral ardisia has crenately toothed leaf margins and red berries. Shoebutton ardisia's flowers are larger than Marlberry's and pinkish purple. Both are Category I invasives that are known to displace native species and alter natural communities. If present, they should be removed and destroyed.

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# GLOSSARY OF HELPFUL TERMS

achene: a dry, indehiscent, one-seeded fruit. acicular: slender or needle-shaped. annual: a plant that germinates, flowers, sets seed, and dies within one year. anther: the pollen-bearing part of the stamen. apex (pl. apices): the tip or point farthest from the point of attachment. appressed: pressed closely but not fused (e.g., leaves against a stem). awn: a narrow bristlelike appendage. axil: the angle formed between one plant and another (e.g., stem and leaf). **axillary:** arising from or born in the leaf axil. **basal:** forming or attached at the base. bract: a modified leaf occurring at the base of a flower or inflorescence. calcareous: a type of soil containing calcium carbonate; generally associated with limestone. calyx (pl. calyces): the sepals of a flower, typically forming a whorl that encloses the petals and protects the flower bud. capsule: a dry fruit composed of two or more carpels. carpel: the female reproductive part of a flower, consisting of an ovary, stigma, and (usually) style. caryopsis: a dry, indehiscent, one-seeded fruit with the seed coat closely fused to the fruit wall; typical of grasses. catkin: a dense, pendulous, flowering spike. cordate: heart-shaped. corm: a fleshy underground stem. corolla: collective term for all the petals of a flower. corona: petal- or crown-like structure between the petals and stamens of a flower, often united in a tube. corymb (adj. corymbose): a type of inflorescence with lower stalks proportionally longer than upper stalks so that the flowers form a flat or slightly rounded head. crenate: having blunt or scalloped teeth. cultivar: a horticultural variety of a naturally occurring "wild" plant species that was produced in cultivation by selection. cypsela: a dry, indehiscent, one-seeded fruit cyme (adj. cymose): a type of inflorescence with the main axis and all lateral branches ending in a flower.

**deciduous:** not persistent, seasonally falling off (e.g., leaves falling from a tree); compare with evergreer. his is a preview.

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# **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**



**Stacey Matrazzo** joined the Florida Wildflower Foundation staff in 2015 as its program manager after serving several years as a contractor. She is an environmental educator and adjunct professor at Rollins College, Winter Park. Stacey is a certified Florida Master Naturalist who holds a bachelor's degree in Environmental Studies and a master's degree in Liberal Studies from Rollins. She has compiled

more than 250 native wildflower species for the foundation's popular weekly social media/online feature, "Flower Friday." A native Floridian, she spends much of her free time kayaking, hiking, birding, and photographing Florida's amazing natural environments.



Nancy Bissett is a horticulturist, restoration ecologist, and botanist with The Natives Inc., a Davenport, Florida, firm offering consulting, ecological restoration, and landscape architecture services. At The Natives' nursery, she has experimented with the propagation and growth of many native plants, including grasses, wildflowers, and rare species. Nancy, who serves on the Florida Wildflower Foundation board, developed many restoration techniques for upland communities while working on projects for state agencies, water management districts, mitiga-

tion banks, mined lands, developers, and corporations throughout Florida. She has assisted with monitoring research projects for The Nature Conservancy, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, and others, and she has performed rare plant and vegetation surveys and helped federal, state, and local authorities find and evaluate rare plant communities.

# ABOUT THE FLORIDA WILDFLOWER FOUNDATION

The nonprofit Florida Wildflower Foundation is the national advocate for the state's native wildflower species, many of which occur throughout the Southeast. The organization nurtures the awareness, understanding, and enjoyment of Florida's native wildflowers and plants through projects that increase the presence of wildflowers and support the wildlife depending upon them. Visit www.flawildflowers.org to download resources, view grant opportunities, and learn more about its work.

