

Rabbitbells

(*Crotalaria rotundifolia*)

For definitions of botanical terms, visit en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_botanical_terms.

Rabbitbells is a low-growing wildflower found in pinelands, sandhills and disturbed sandy areas throughout Florida. Its small yellow flowers bloom throughout the year, attracting mostly bees. The unassuming plant often goes unnoticed as its flowers do not open until the afternoon and remain open only for one day. Of the 15 species of *Crotalaria* that occur in Florida, only four are native. Rabbitbells is the most common and widespread of the native species.

All *Crotalaria* species are poisonous if ingested due to the presence of pyrrolizidine alkaloids. Keep away from small children, pets and livestock. Despite the toxicity, plants in this genus are larval hosts for the Ceraunus blue butterfly and the Bella moth (also known as the Rattlebox moth). The latter relies on the plant's toxic alkaloids, which it obtains from the seeds, for its brilliant colors.



Photo by Alan Cressler, courtesy of Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center

Rabbitbells' butter-yellow flowers have two petals. The upper petal is larger and broad with reddish nectar guides; the lower petal is keeled. Flowers are terminal, pedicellate and typically less than ½ inch long. Calyces are five-lobed, reddish and hairy. Leaves are simple, oval to oblong, with pubescent upper surfaces. They are alternately arranged. Stems are hairy, multi-branched and may be erect or prostrate. Fruits are cylindrical balloon-like pods. Young pods are grayish- or yellowish-green. As they mature, they turn brownish-black and dry out. The loose seeds inside rattle when the dry fruit is shaken.

The genus name *Crotalaria* is from the Greek *crotalum*, meaning "clapper" or "castanet," and refers to the rattle-like seed pods characteristic of all *Crotalaria* species. Plants in this genus are also known by the common names "rattlebox" and "rattlepod." (*Crotalum* is also the root of *Crotalus*, the genus of which rattlesnakes are members.) The species epithet *rotundifolia* is from the Latin *rotundus*, or "round," and *folium*, meaning "leaf." It refers to Rabbitbells' leaf shape, which is more rounded than other *Crotalaria* species.

Family: Fabaceae (Legume or pea family)

Native range: Nearly throughout

To see where natural populations of Rabbitbells have been vouchered, visit www.florida.plantatlas.usf.edu.

Hardiness: Zones 8A–11

Lifespan: Perennial

Soil: Moist to moderately dry, well-drained sandy or calcareous soils

Exposure: Full sun

Growth habit: 3–6" tall and sprawling

Propagation: Seed

Garden tips: Rabbitbells' tendency to form dense mats makes it a good groundcover option for open sandy areas.

Although not commercially available, the plant is easy to propagate from seed and requires little maintenance. Once established, it spreads by self-sown seeds and can be contained by periodic removal of seed pods. The plant may become dormant in winter in North Florida or if exposed to freezing temperatures or extended drought conditions.