

## A WORD OR TWO ABOUT GARDENING

### **A Selection of Less Familiar Red Flowering Shrubs for Miami-Dade Landscapes**

Following two previous articles on red in Miami-Dade landscapes (first on flowering trees then some popular shrubs) this series concludes with a look at some less widely used tropical shrubs.

In addition to the familiar bougainvilleas, ixoras, hibiscus, plumerias and oleanders described in the last article, there are several other red flowering shrubs that are fairly common in Miami-Dade landscapes. ***Calliandra haematocephala***, the **red powderpuff** is a large (12 – 15') woody stemmed shrub with bipinnately compound leaves, each pinnae composed of 5-8 pairs of ½-2" leaflets. The tight, globose, mimosa-like inflorescences owe their ornamental appeal to the many prominent, red, exserted stamens of the component flowers. Powderpuffs are drought tolerant, preferring soils that remain on the dry side, and although they will take some shade, full sun results in more prolific flowering. Flower production is stimulated as days shorten, lasting from late fall - early spring. Once flowering ceases the shrub can be cut back hard if necessary and given an application of a complete slow release fertilizer. The dwarf cv. ***C. haematocephala* 'Nana'**, growing slowly to no more than 5', is a better choice where space is at a premium. Although the inflorescence is not as spectacular, this cultivar flowers on and of year round.

***Calliandra tergemina* var. *emarginata*** (syn. *C. emarginata*) is also suitable where space is limited; often sprawling and low growing in open sunny sites it assumes a more erect growth habit where there is some shade (growing to 5 - 6'). The leaves are composed of paired pinnae each with 2-4 smooth, shiny leaflets. The inflorescence is similar (but smaller) to *C. haematocephala* with the stamens deep pink to red. This was a Florida Nursery Growers '2006 Plant of the Year' selection, but is still not widely available locally. Thornbugs are the most frequent insect pest of powderpuffs, plus occasional infestations with white flies and scale insects.

A group of unrelated shrubs (***Callistemon* sp.**) also feature flowers with prominently exserted stamens, though arranged in a cylindrical rather than globose inflorescence. An earlier article on red flowering trees described the weeping bottlebrush (*C. viminalis*). Although usually grown as a small tree, it can assume a more shrubby form; indeed most bottlebrushes grow as small to large shrubs. Useful where space is limited, the 3-4' cultivar '**Little John**' (probably derived from *C. citrinus*), is a slow growing extremely compact shrub covered with deep red flowers for much of the summer. It requires full sun and free draining preferably moist soil (some limited drought tolerance) and should be mulched. Prune lightly to shape as necessary after flowering. Useful on its' own as a small accent plant, spaced 3' o,c, to form a low informal hedge, or as a group of 4 or 5 plants in a sunny corner of the landscape, under-planted with white Mexican heather or dwarf Carissa.

Like the bottlebrush, the **dwarf poinciana** or **pride of Barbados** (***Caesalpinia pulcherrima***) is sometimes grown as a small tree but more often develops into a somewhat open shrub (to 10') with a few scattered thorns. Not as widely used in Miami-Dade as in the past, its' superior ability to tolerate drought and poor soils

point to a possible resurgence of interest as increasing emphasis is placed on low maintenance landscapes. Dwarf poinciana is a colorful shrub, the inflorescence an upright panicle having flowers with yellow margined, orangey red petals (all yellow forms also found). Fast growing with irregular branching, it can become somewhat untidy necessitating regular pruning to help maintain a neat appearance. 'Compton' is a more upright cultivar (easier to maintain as a small tree) having white margined deep pink to scarlet petals. Much less common is ***C. cassioides*** the **cassia- leafed caesalpinia** with emarginate (notched) grayish green leaflets and bright scarlet, bell-shaped to tubular flowers. Found as a sparsely thorny, large shrub or small tree, it grows locally to about 15'. Caesalpinias require full sun, free draining soil and are well adapted to sandy/rocky soils.

Descriptions of other red flowering woody shrubs can be found in previous articles for this column. Among these are several member of the Rubiaceae (ixora family) including the familiar ***Hamelia patens*** (**fire-bush**) and less familiar ***Rondeletia leucophylla*** (**bush pentas**). The former is native to Florida and although drought tolerant grows better where there is regular soil moisture. The so-called 'African' fire-bush, now believed to be *H. patens* var. *glabra*, is found from northern S. America through northern Mexico - it is native to neither Africa nor Florida. It has orangey yellow rather than orangey red flowers and smaller, glabrous (smooth) leaves rather than the larger roughly hairy leaves of the species type. Bush pentas, growing up to 10', blooms winter into late spring with deep pinkish-red flower heads and is drought tolerant in addition to being well adapted to local Miami limestone. It is occasionally found in local garden centers.

***Rondeletia. strigosa*** is a semi-woody species, rare in local landscapes, but which could be used more. From the base of the plant arise numerous long, slender, somewhat bowed, green, cane- like stems (to 4' locally) bearing bright green, lanceolate to ovate leaves. The flowers, which occur in terminal clusters, are an eye-catching bright pink to crimson with a prominent golden yellow eye. Flowering occurs on and off throughout the warmer months of the year – stems should be deadheaded as they finish flowering. Well adapted to local limestone soils, it is also an especially attractive subject for a large urn-shaped planter; situate in full sun and provide a free-draining soil. ***Portlandia coccinea*** and ***P. proctorii*** (**syn. *P. coccinea* var. *proctorii***) are two other underutilized members of the Rubiaceae. The flowers of these two species are trumpet-shaped, scarlet and dark red respectively; the bell flower *P. grandiflora*, which may be familiar to some readers, has similar shaped flowers, though these are twice as long (6-8') and pearly white. Like the bellflower these two other portlandias are slow growing to at most 10' and can be grown as shrubs or small trees. Best situated where there is some high shifting shade, they adapt well to local limestone if supplemented with some added organic matter.

Far more familiar in local landscapes, **peregrina (*Jatropha integerrima*)** a member of the spurge family (Euphorbiaceae), is also known simply as jatropha or spicy jatropha, and popular with local Cuban Americans (it is native to Cuba). Locally it forms an open woody shrub up to 10', the dark green leaves more or less elliptic, often with slightly lobed margins, or occasionally more deeply lobed with a prominent terminal lobe. The inflorescence comprises a terminal branched cyme,

each flower (in clusters of three) having a bright red tubular corolla. The cultivar '**Compacta**' is tighter growing and narrower, ideal for planters (use a soil mix with added coarse sand and Perma-Til) where it can be kept at 3-4'. The more compact form also makes it easier to train as a small tree, eventually attaining a height of  $\approx 10'$ . Peregrina thrives in poor soil, including the rocky/sandy soils found in Miami-Dade, is drought tolerant and requires minimal care. Choose a free draining site in full sun, prune as necessary (can be cut back hard in late winter if necessary) and apply a slow release fertilizer in spring. Watch for scale insects (more likely where there is poor air circulation) and to a lesser extent damage from mites.

Two other jatrophas are occasionally seen in local landscapes, the **gout plant** (*J. podagrica*) and **coral plant** (*J. multifida*). The former is of more ornamental appeal and grown as much for the unusual swollen knobby trunk as the flat topped clusters of small, brilliant orangey red flowers. The leaves, which are large (to 12" wide) and deeply lobed (like a fig leaf), are concentrated near the branch tips on long petioles. Flower clusters are borne on long, red tinted stems, and are found on and off throughout the year. Gout plant can grow to about 6', however thinning most of the leaves is used to lessen vertical growth and encourage the 'trunk' to become more swollen (pachycaulous). Depending on how cool it is during winter, there may be some yellowing and loss of leaves. Situate gout plant in full sun, providing a rapidly draining soil (should contain  $\frac{1}{3}$  coarse sand/grit), otherwise it is very prone to rot. Do not water during winter. Make a light application of a slow release fertilizer some time in late spring. Apart from root and stem rots watch for scale insects and mites (especially in late winter/spring). Gout plant is also sold as **Budhas belly** and **Guatemala rhubarb** and is especially useful as a source of flower color in a dry rock garden where it can be combined with plants such as agaves, aloes and cactus-like euphorbias.

The coral plant is larger, growing locally to about 15' as a small tree or large shrub. The leaves are about the same size as the gout plant, however they are parted into such thin lobes (each lobe itself is also often dissected) that they appear far less coarse. The flower clusters are similar to those of the gout plant though a more pinkish red. **All jatrophas are poisonous** causing severe vomiting and prolonged diarrhea, especially the coral plant and in particular the seeds (which unfortunately have a rather appealing taste). Another group of euphorbias that are ideal for full sun sites and dry sandy/rocky soil are varieties/cultivars of **crown of thorns**, *E. milii*. In particular look for *E. x lomi* **Poysean Group** hybrids, several of which have red inflorescences. These Poysean hybrids have thicker stems and do not sprawl as much as *E. milii* and produce much large flower heads. More information on these and other crown of thorns will be found in an earlier article.

Of all the red flowering members of the spurge family none is more popular than *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, the **poinsettia**. As was pointed out in a previous article, this should be considered as more than just a disposable Christmas houseplant; with a little care it can find a more permanent place in local yards. Also in the spurge family another semi-woody shrub the **chenille plant** (*Acalypha hispida*), is easily recognized from its' unique inflorescence, a long, pendent, tassel-like spike containing hundreds of tiny, fuzzy, red flowers. These are found only on plants with

female flowers (i.e. with red multi-branched styles), so those bearing male flowers are of no landscaping interest – chenille plant is dioecious. Propagation is limited therefore to vegetative methods, usually from soft or semi-ripe cuttings. Chenille plant is a vigorous fast growing rather coarse textured shrub with large, thin, bright green, oval leaves and can quickly grow to 10-12'. Once established it will form a large clump (on Miami limestone it frequently forms root suckers, and any prostrate stems that contact moist soil readily root). Cut back (no more than 1/3 on any one occasion) to keep it within bounds. Water regular as necessary (only limited drought tolerance), and apply a slow release fertilizer 2-3x per year to ensure bright green foliage and fully colored flower spikes. Scale insects, mealybugs and occasionally mites can be pests.

The **trailing chenille plant** or **kittens tail** (*A. reptans* var. *pygmaea*) is a miniature version with trailing stems that finds use in hanging baskets or as a colorful groundcover for areas where limited coverage is needed. Like *A. hispida* water as required and apply fertilizer on a regular basis; although not as fast growing, stems should be thinned if growth becomes congested. On limestone leaves may become chlorotic – if so, apply a trace element nutritional spray.

Other semi-woody shrubs include two striking, red flowering members of the Acanthaceae. The first of these, the **firespike**, *Odontanema cuspidatum* is the easiest to grow, amenable to either full sun or part shade. This is a clump forming shrub to 6' with multiple green stems which become woody at the base and exhibit limited branching. The leaves are somewhat glossy, oblong to elliptic, with wavy margins and acuminate (pointed) tips. Individual flowers are bright red, tubular ( $\approx 1'$ ) with five small lobes, have a waxy appearance and are found in terminal, sometimes branched, racemes. The flowers are not only showy (mainly spring into fall), but are excellent attractants for hummingbirds and butterflies. In some cases inflorescences become fasciated (individual flowers develop as if fused together), giving them an unusual, flattened, almost strap-like appearance. Once established firespike, although drought tolerant, thrives more if soil moisture remains constant. It has few pests and on sandy soils prone to nematode problems is of particular utility, being resistant to root knot nematodes. Pruning to remove spent inflorescences, dead stems and excessive root suckers will be required, plus an application of a complete slow release fertilizer in late spring.

**Cardinal's guard**, *Pachystachys coccinea* also in the Acanthaceae can grow locally to about 5' with semi woody stems, 8" lightly wrinkled bright green leaves, and somewhat square, upright, 8" spikes of overlapping green bracts and scarlet tubular flowers. Although quite spectacular, only a limited number of spikes form, with flowering occurring from late winter into spring. Each spike opens from the base up over a period of about 2-3 weeks. Cardinal's guard requires regular applications of a complete slow release fertilizer and evenly moist soil – add some Canadian peat and mulch to help retain soil moisture. It is ideal for areas of the yard offering some shade; limit full sun exposure to no more than the first 2 hours after sunrise followed by bright light - insufficient light will reduce flowering. Exposure to hot sun greatly increases the risk of wilting with subsequent leaf drop; since new leaves only form at stem tips the shrub becomes open and bare. Cardinal's guard is sensitive to cold

and this too can cause leaves to drop - some overhead shade also helps protect plants when temperatures approach freezing. Many shrubs in the Acanthaceae have a tendency to become leggy and this is certainly true of *Pachystachys*; when combined with almost leafless stems the result is an unattractive plant. In such instances cut back cardinal's guard severely to a main stem to stimulate new compact leafy growth. There is some confusion over the identity of cardinal's guard: two distinct species, *P. spicata* and *P. coccinea*, are known by that common name with the former species having been misidentified as the latter in the past. Most material sold as cardinal's guard is listed as *P. coccinea*.

Like *P. coccinea* the **red plumbago**, *Plumbago indica*, flowers during winter and into early spring. This is a red flowering more tropical relative of the familiar blue flowering *P. auriculata*. The leaves are a darker green and much larger (ovate to elliptic,  $\approx 4'' \times 2''$ ), the scarlet flowers borne terminally on long arching racemose spikes (to 18'') compared to the much shorter spikes on *P. auriculata*. Red plumbago is a lax clump forming plant though not as sprawling as blue plumbago. Compared to the Mediterranean type climate of S. Africa's Cape (where *P. auriculata* is native), the red plumbago favors a hotter more humid climate, being endemic to SE Asia. Situate in full sun and plant in evenly moist soil enriched with some organic matter - water during periods of hot dry weather, less so during winter. As flowering ends in spring red plumbago can be heavily cut back. Flowering is induced as days shorten so avoid pruning after September.

Several shrubs and vines with small tubular red flowers have common names that include the term firecracker (e.g., *Cuphea ignea*, cigar or firecracker plant and *Manettia luteorubra* firecracker vine). Another, **Russelia equisetiformis** (**firecracker** or **fountain bush**) is fairly common locally, though probably not as widely used as 20-30 years ago - it found favor grown in large concrete planters. A clump forming much branched shrub to 4', this firecracker has green, pendent, wiry, angular stems that are practically leafless (leaves reduced to scales). These bear clusters of thin 1½'' red tubular flowers throughout most of the year. Provide a free draining gritty soil - *R. equisetiformis* is highly drought tolerant and grows well even on nutrient poor soils, but is intolerant of soils that remain wet. When used in-ground, the clump can expand to more than 5' and should be cut back to keep it within bounds. **Russelia sarmentosa** (**coral plant** - yes, yet another common name applied to more than one plant!) has stiffer more erect stems along which at intervals are whorled three 2'' heart-shaped leaves. The tubular flowers are in loose axillary clusters, rosy red and in evidence for much of the year. Growing to 6-7' coral plant responds well to pruning and can be used as a low, airy, informal hedge, or foundation plant.

There are several scandent or climbing shrubs with red flowers/inflorescences (e.g., *Manettia luteorubra*, *Bauhinia galpini*, *Holmskjoldia sanguinea*, *Mucuna bennetti* and *Musseanda erythrophylla* as well as species/cultivars of *Hoya*, and *Passiflora*). Details of these will be found in previous articles on vines and climbers. Also consult previous detailed articles on red flowering gingers, costas and heliconias; these are excellent choices to spark up a shade garden.



Figure 1 *Pachystachys coccinea* (cardinal's guard)