

ACANTHACEAE IN FLORIDA GARDENS

D. G. BURCH AND E. W. DEMMY
Horticultural Masterworks
 4044 SW 4th Street
 Plantation, FL 33317

Additional index words. ground cover, shrub, vine.

Abstract. A large number of species of the family Acanthaceae are grown as garden plants or as flowering pot plants in Florida. The plant's display comes either from the inflorescence (from the flowers themselves or the bracts which subtend them) or from colorful leaves. All growth forms from groundcovers to large vines are found, and there are plants for a wide variety of sunlight conditions and water regimes. A few aggressive weeds of garden or greenhouse are known. A checklist of the most frequently grown species is given.

Mention the word "Acanthaceae" to most Florida gardeners and it will draw a puzzled stare, but the fact is that some members of the family are very common and showy, and are well known by their common names. The shrimp plant, *Justicia brandegeana*, for example, was a favorite of south Florida gardens (in the days when people "garden" rather than "landscaped"), and the sky or clock vine, *Thunbergia grandiflora*, has been included in lists of favorite vines since the earliest publications on Florida gardens.

The family has worldwide distribution in the tropics and subtropics, and includes herbs, shrubs and vines with a few woody members reaching tree size. About 2500 species in 250 genera are recognized, but of these less than 100 have been widely cultivated. Members of the family are found in nature in habitats ranging from full sun to dense shade, and from saltwind-lashed dry coastal scrub to grassland or the understory of wet forest.

The attraction of these plants for garden use may come from leaf color or from the inflorescence. In most cases the flowers are carried in spikes or racemes, and each flower is borne in the axil of a bract. These bracts may be large, showy and overlapping (giving the "shrimp" look to the shrimp plant) or relatively small compared with the flowers. In some cases they are almost unnoticeable and the flowers themselves are large and are the showy structures.

There is a wide range of colors in the inflorescences (Table 1) bright red in *Ruellia coccinea* or in Cardinal's guard, *Pachystachys coccinea*, where the axis of the inflorescence is often fasciated to form a broad flat structure, orange in *Justicia spicigera* and *Crossandra*, yellow bracts with white flowers in the golden shrimp plant, *Pachystachys lutea*, white with colored markings at the throat as in *Pseuderanthemum reticulatum*, pink in *Justicia carnea*, pink and blue in Karneval, *Porphyrocoma pohliana*, blue in *Eranthemum pulchellum*, *Thunbergia grandiflora* and species of

Table 1. Checklist of Acanthaceae used in Florida.

Species/common name	Herbaceous	Shrub	Vine	Height	Floral		Notes
					color	season	
<i>Acanthus montanus</i> Mountain thistle		X		4 ft	White	Summer	Large spiny leaves of unusual shape
<i>Aphelandra squarrosa</i> Zebra plant	X			18 inches	Waxy Yellow	All year	Several cultivars used as pot plants
<i>Aphelandra tetragona</i>		X		5 ft	Red	Summer	Good in shade
<i>Asystasia gangetica</i> Coromandel			X	10 ft	Pink, Yellow	Spring	Good as a ground cover (1 ft). Salt tolerant
<i>Barleria cristata</i> Philippine violet		X		4 ft	Blue, White	Summer/Fall	Needs hard pruning
<i>Barleria lupulina</i>		X		3 ft	Yellow	All year	Spiny, open growth. Leaf has red midvein
<i>Chamaeranthemum gaudichaudii</i>	X			6 inches	Inconsequential		Rosette of colorful leaves
<i>Crossandra</i>	X			2 ft	Orange	Warm season	Reliable flowering in shade. Pot or ground
<i>infundibuliformis</i>							Similar to above species but pubescent
<i>Crossandra nilotica</i>	X			2 ft	Orange	Warm season	Flowers best with severe pruning
<i>Eranthemum pulchellum</i> Blue sage		X		4 ft	Blue	Early Spring	Useful in part shade
<i>Eranthemum wattii</i>	X			2 ft	Violet	Summer	Groundcover or basket.
<i>Fittonia verschaffeltii</i>	X			4 inches	Inconsequential		Several cultivars, some with silver leaf veins some flushed pink
<i>Graptophyllum pictum</i> Caricature plant		X		6 ft	Purple	Summer	Leaves purple or green with yellow splotch
<i>Hemigraphis alternata</i> (<i>H. colorata</i>)	X			12 inches	White	Summer/Fall	Leaves burgundy above dark green below. Sun or shade, basket or ground-cover
<i>Hemigraphis</i> 'Exotica' Waffle plant	X			15 inches	White	Summer/Fall	Leaves bullate, larger than <i>H. alternata</i>

Table 1. Continued

Species/common name	Herbaceous	Shrub	Vine	Height	Floral		Notes
					color	season	
<i>Hypoestes phyllostachya</i> Freckle face	X			18 inches	Inconsequential		Leaves heavily dotted with pink
<i>Justicia adhatoda</i>		X		8 ft	White/red	Summer	Needs heavy pruning
<i>Justicia brandegeana</i> Shrimp Plant	X			3 ft	Pinkish or chartreuse	Warm season	Easy reliable plant
<i>Justicia carnea</i> Plume flower		X		6 ft	Pink or white	Summer/Fall	Susceptible to sucking insect damage
<i>Justicia fulvicoma</i> Red shrimp plant	X			3 ft	Reddish green	Warm season	A less showy red form of the Shrimp Plant
<i>Justicia spicigera</i>		X		6 ft	Orange	Spring	Strong grower Good in shade
<i>Megaskepasma erythrochlamys</i>		X		6 ft	White/red bracts	Fall	Large leaves
<i>Odontonema strictum</i> Firespike		X		6 ft	Red	Summer	One form has silvery variegated leaves
<i>Pachystachys coccinea</i> Cardinal's guard		X		4 ft	Red	Warm season	Inflorescences often fasciated
<i>Pachystachys lutea</i> Golden shrimp plant	X			3 ft	White bracts	All year Yellow	Long season of color
<i>Peristrophe hyssopifolia</i>	X			18 inches	Lavender	Warm season	A yellow-variegated form is used in baskets
<i>Porphyrocoma pohliana</i> Karneval plant	X			18 inches	Pink/blue	Warm	Used as a potplant
<i>Pseuderanthemum alatum</i> Chocolate plant	X			6 inches	Purple	Fall	Rosette of brownish leaves, flowers small
<i>Pseuderanthemum atropurpureum</i>		X		5 ft	White	Fall	Dark colored leaves
<i>Pseuderanthemum reticulatum</i>		X		5 ft	White	Fall	Yellow reticulation to leaves. Salt tolerant
<i>Ruellia brittoniana</i>	X			3 ft	Blue	Spring to winter	Tough, drought resistant plant
<i>Ruellia coccinea</i>	X			2 ft	Red	Summer	Reliable in shade
<i>Ruellia macrantha</i>		X		6 ft	Red	Summer	Scandent to vining
<i>Ruellia makoyana</i>	X			18 inches	Lavender	Summer/Fall	Leaves with a silver splash, red below
<i>Ruspolia hypocrateriformis</i>		X		3 ft	Yellow/red	Summer	Straggly growth
<i>Rutya fruticosa</i>		X		10 ft	yellow or red	Summer	Flower of an unusual form, dark blotched
<i>Sanchezia speciosa</i>		X		10 ft	Yellow	Fall	Yellow veined leaves Dwarf forms preferred
<i>Sciaphyllum amoenum</i>	X			2 ft	Purple	Summer	Brownish leaves
<i>Strobilanthes dyeranus</i>		X		6 ft	Purple	Summer	Leaves purple flushed with silver bands
<i>Thunbergia alata</i> Black-eyed susan vine			X	10 ft	Various	Warm season	Orange with black eye, and white flowers known
<i>Thunbergia erecta</i> King's mantle		X		5 ft	Purple or white	Warm season	Free flowering in full sun
<i>Thunbergia grandiflora</i> Clock vine			X	60 ft	Blue or white	Warm season	Spectacular hanging inflorescences (<i>T. laurifolia</i> is similar)
<i>Xantheranthemum igneum</i>	X			3 inches	White	Summer/Fall	Rosette of dark green leaves with bold yellow central splash

Ruellia, pink in coromandel. *Asystasia gangetica*, or a deep rich purple as in *Thunbergia erecta*.

Leaf color is also varied. *Sanchezia speciosa* has dark green leaves with brilliant yellow veins, *Fittonia* is intricately veined with silver. *Graptophyllum pictum* and *Pseuderanthemum atropurpureum* are brownish purple with yellow or white splotches, the *Hemigraphis* species have burgundy red upper surfaces and are dark green below while *Strobilanthes dyeranus* has silver longitudinal bands that contrast with a purple flush.

Uses in the garden cover most of the landscaping needs except those which must be met by a tree habit. The strong growing vines can serve as roof or walls for garden spaces given the right support, and the clock vine is breathtaking

in full bloom when it has been allowed to scramble through the full height of a tree. The shrubs are useful in mixed plantings for the various leaf forms and flower colors, and the herbaceous forms are being widely used for bedding (the golden shrimp plant is very much favored for this because of the free-blooming habit and the long period in which it stays in color) and for ground covers.

Plants which remain colorful in shade are not always easy to find, but crossandra is a reliable bloomer under trees, and many of the colored leaf plants hold their color well in shade. *Sanchezia* is particularly good in this respect, and the dwarf cultivar 'Ellen' will brighten a dark area under trees all year round. It also does well in the interior in a bright situation, but the best known member of the

family for use as a house plant is the zebra plant, *Aphelandra squarrosa*. This has been the subject of much breeding work to produce plants whose waxy-looking deep yellow bracts contrast very effectively with shiny white veined dark green leaves.

There are few problems with members of the family if they are used in the correct location. Most, unfortunately, are not cold-hardy so that they are more reliable in south Florida than in the rest of the state. There may be problems with scale insect from time to time, but this is easily controlled with a soap spray. Some of the dense growing types may also develop mealybug colonies, but here again a soap spray will take care of the problem if the spraying is done conscientiously.

On the negative side of the family scorecard are a few species that have become aggressive weeds. *Blechnum pyramidatum* is strong growing herb that is difficult to eradicate from planted areas since it breaks as it is being pulled out leaving the nucleus of the next infestation. One or two others have been reported as greenhouse weeds, but in commercial situations have been eradicated easily by the usual weed control operations.

Here then is a family which is well worth getting to know if your garden is in a warm part of the state: Easy to propagate, no major problems or demands, and a range of tolerance of shade, sun, salt spray and other common garden conditions coupled with attractive features that make them a valuable part of the plant spectrum available to our gardens.