

SIZZLING SUMMER VEGETABLES

By Norma Kisida, Master Gardener Volunteer

Above Photo: Luffa

Photo Credit: Guodong Liu, UF/IFAS
<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/HS1285>

Our hot and humid summers are not suitable for most vegetables but there are some such as okra and luffa that prefer those conditions and have a long growing season in warmer weather. While these may not be the most popular vegetables there are ways to enjoy them that may not be well known.

While growing up in the deep South the most popular way to cook okra was to bread it with cornmeal and flour and fry it in some sort of oil. Because okra (*Abelmoschus esculentus*) contains a gel-like substance called mucilage it is used as a thickening agent in soups or stews and of course, gumbo. It is somewhat slimy which is not a desirable characteristic to many people. But there are ways to prepare it to lessen the sliminess such as soaking in vinegar for 5 minutes before cooking. It can also be baked, roasted, sauteed, pickled, and even grilled. Another Southern traditional recipe is stewed tomatoes and okra made with bacon, garlic, and other seasonings. Okra freezes well, either sliced or whole, depending on how it will be cooked. Because okra is in the hibiscus family, the blooms are beautiful, and the dried pods may be used in decorations such as wreaths.

The best months for growing okra are March to November. It needs a sunny location in well-drained soil and does well in containers. A popular and easily found variety is 'Clemson Spineless' but there are other varieties that come in various colors. Soaking the seeds in water for several hours helps with germination. Pick the pods when they reach two to three inches and before it becomes tough. Leave some pods on the plant to dry for seeds for next year.

Another vegetable that grows well here in summer is luffa. Luffa is summer squash and there are two types, angled luffa (*Luffa acutangula*) and smooth luffa (*L. aegyptica*). Although it is most known as a sponge when dried and peeled it can also be eaten raw, added to salad, stir fries, or shredded and used like zucchini in bread recipes. It can also be skewered and grilled. However, like okra, it must be harvested young before it gets tough and fibrous.

Luffa grows on sturdy vines and has a large beautiful yellow bloom which is attractive to pollinators. The vines can grow up to 30 feet so require some kind of support such as a trellis. The vines can be woven into baskets, dried slices can be decorative, used in kids' crafts, and sometimes used for rabbits to nibble on.



Luffa

Photo Credit: Guodong Liu, UF/IFAS
<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/HS1285>



Okra

Courtesy of Norma Kisida

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Okra-<https://gardeningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/plants/edibles/vegetables/okra/>
 Luffa-<https://gardeningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/plants/edibles/vegetables/luffa/>

ASK A MASTER GARDENER VOLUNTEER



Master Gardener Volunteer Karen Holleran answers your email questions at: ManateeMG@gmail.com.

Call our Master Gardener Volunteer Plant Diagnostic Clinic at: Phone: 941-722-4524

Open weekdays (except Wednesdays) from 9:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M.

In-person visits are welcome at:

The UF/IFAS Extension Manatee County Office

1303 17th St. W., Palmetto, FL 34221

Or at our mobile plant clinics (see below).

Dear MG, I came across this beautiful little shrub in a hotel courtyard. Google Lens identified it as an Alternanthera, but I can't figure out the specific variety. Can you tell me what it is?



Resident Submission

Dear Resident, This plant isn't Alternanthera, but a cultivar of *Hamelia patens*, a firebush, called *Hamelia patens* var. 'Grelmsiz' Lime Sizzler™. It is a stunning shrub, and like the native firebush (*H. patens* var. *patens*), it's well adapted to our climate. Thriving in full sun and tolerant of a wide variety of soil pH, this mounding shrub only needs occasional watering once established. It rarely needs pruning. Red, tubular flowers that are present throughout the year make it attractive to hummingbirds and butterflies. Reaching a height of 3 - 5 feet, Lime Sizzler™ can be grown in a large pot. It makes a welcome addition of color contrast to foundation, bed, and border plantings.

The following link is to information about the plant for you to refer to.

<https://www.lsuagcenter.com/articles/page1569965660401>



MASTER GARDENER VOLUNTEER MOBILE PLANT CLINICS

Location	Address	Day(s)	Time
Bob Gardner Park	2710 White Eagle Blvd., Lakewood Ranch	Third Sundays	9AM - 12PM
Crowder Bros. Ace Hardware	5409 Manatee Ave W., Bradenton	Third Saturdays	9AM - 12PM
Central Library	1301 1st St. W., Bradenton	Third Saturdays	11:30AM - 2:30PM
Lakewood Ranch Farmers Market	Waterside Place, 7500 Island Cove Terrace, Sarasota	First Sundays	10AM - 2PM
Rocky Bluff Library	6750 US Hwy 301 N., Ellenton	Second & Fourth Saturdays	10AM - 1PM
St. George's Episcopal Church	912 63rd Ave. W., Bradenton	First & Third Thursdays	9AM - 12PM
Island Branch Library	5701 Marina Dr, Holmes Beach	First Saturdays	10AM - 1PM
UF/IFAS Extension Manatee County Tel. 941-722-4524 manateemg@gmail.com	1303 17th St. W., Palmetto	Every weekday except Wednesdays	10AM - 2PM

OWLS

By John Dawson, Master Gardener Volunteer

Owls are unique in the bird world as they are primarily night hunters. They possess physical properties which make them formidable night raptors. Most strikingly, their large eyes facing forward for optimal stereoscopic vision, with sizable pupils and light receptors for superb night vision. Owls cannot move their eyes, but they can swivel their heads 270 degrees. Owl ears are offset and face in different directions allowing them to locate and hear moving prey in total darkness. Their feathers are designed to muffle sounds of their flight making it difficult for prey to hear them coming. Many rodents prefer feeding at night to avoid a host of daytime predators, leaving them vulnerable to owls. Owls consume thousands of rodents a year. Since they are incapable of digesting fur and bones, they have a second part of their stomach which compacts all the indigestible food into small pellets which the owl then spits out. Owl “pellets” at the base of a tree usually indicates that an owl likes to roost or is nesting there.

There are six species of owls that call Florida home: the barn owl, barred owl, burrowing owl, screech owl, great horned owl and the short-eared owl. More information on each of these species, including audio clips can be found at Cornell University’s www.allaboutbirds.org. Locally, the best place to look for owls are Felts Audubon Preserve, Palma Sola Botanical Park (home of great horned owl “Ozzy”) and Duette Preserve. Whereas the great horned owl is our largest owl, the screech owl is the smallest, standing at only nine inches. The burrowing owl is unique in that it prefers to nest underground, usually in burrows once occupied by armadillos, skunks, and tortoises, although they are capable of digging their own. A great local owl video can be found on YouTube - search for Explorers’ Academy: Florida’s Owls presented by Manatee County Natural Resources.



Burrowing owl

Photo Credit: Robert David Siegel, M.D., PhD,
Stanford University



Eastern screech owl

Photo Credit: Robert David Siegel, M.D., PhD,
Stanford University



Great horned owl

Photo Credit: Robert David Siegel, M.D., PhD,
Stanford University



Barred owl

Photo Credit: Robert David Siegel, M.D., PhD,
Stanford University



Short-eared owl

Photo Credit: U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service



Barn owl

Photo Credit: Robert David Siegel, M.D., PhD,
Stanford University

SPIDERS IN THE GARDEN

By Jennifer Tonge-Martin, Master Gardener Volunteer

Florida is host to many wonderful Southern bulbs, most of which can be planted anytime in the garden. Neighbors who have bulbs often split them in the spring or fall, to spread out and replant. Extras are cheerfully shared among their gardener friends. Everyone is happy, right? But in the process, common names of these flowers are also shared and often confused with each other. Problems occur: where should this bulb be planted? How much water, sun or fertilizer should it get? How big will it be? If the scientific name (genus, species, and variety) is unknown, gardening mistakes will occur.

An example of such flower folly is with the spider lily, a common name applied to several different plants. Though they all have flowers with long, thin petals that remind one of spider legs, their growth habits can be quite different. Some are native, some are Florida-friendly, and some are sold here but just don't grow well in Central or South Florida at all.

Hymenocallis is our native spider lily genus, in the family of Amaryllidaceae.

There are over sixty distinct species of this spider lily, but most are easily recognized by the central “umbrella” shape of their petals that extend into long, thin drooping “legs.” Mostly white, there are some varieties that are yellow or green. Some flowers are few but large, others are small but occur in great clusters. The flower stalks arise from a basal rosette of strappy green leaves with a distinctly “tropical” feel. All our *Hymenocallis* are hardy to zone 11, like a little shade, and are drought-tolerant though they prefer moist areas. *H. latifolia* and *H. littoralis* grow well along waterways, drainage ditches and ponds. Another popular “spider lily” bulb is *Crinum americanum*, also known as the “swamp lily” or “string lily.” Bigger than *Hymenocallis*, the strappy leaves grow up to 4 feet tall. Like *Hymenocallis*, they are classified as members of the Amaryllidaceae and love wet areas, especially bodies of still water. They do best with similar cold and shade tolerances as *Hymenocallis*, too. *Crinum asiaticum*, though non-native, is quite Florida-friendly. The pink and pink-and-white-striped spider flowers with reddish leaves may be *C. asiaticum* rather than *C. americanum*, but both are commonly called “spider lilies”!



Hymenocallis latifolia

Photo Credit: UF/IFAS



Crinum asiaticum

Photo Credit: UF/IFAS

Two other spider lily bulbs from the Amaryllis family are the genera *Lycoris* and *Nerine*. Though well-known in cooler climates (and some authorities assert that they are hardy to zone 10), these red (sometimes yellow) flowers do not like our hot, wet summers. They must have well-drained soil to stay healthy. They disappear in the summer, then the flower stalks are supposed to come up in the fall. If it's too hot and/or wet, they won't come back at all.

You may come across yet another “spider lily” that's not a bulb or even a real lily: *Heimerocallis*, the day lily. There are many varieties of this colorful North American native that have long, leggy recurved petals and are also called spiders. Only evergreen varieties, especially if they were hybridized in Florida, tolerate our zone 10 weather. These spiders like full sun and lots of water, but the soil must be well-draining. Fertilize before blooming for the best flower show.

Though it may take a vivid imagination to see the resemblance between “spider lilies” and real spiders, these arachnid imposters are wonderful, easy-care flowering plants, well worth introducing into your garden.

WEBINARS TO WATCH: TURFGRASS

By Amy L. Stripe, Master Gardener Volunteer

If you are devoted to your turfgrass, educating yourself about this plant is critical. Turfgrass in general consumes copious amounts of inputs: water, fertilizer, pesticides, mowing, and time. In our Master Gardener Diagnostic Plant Clinic, turfgrass issues are the number one questions. This plant is largely a passive player in the landscape; it doesn't support pollinators but is hugely desirable by most homeowners.

Here are three recently recorded UF/IFAS Extension webinars on: new cultivars of turfgrass to conserve water; common diseases; and safe herbicides. (These are all YouTube videos, so expect ads!)

Dr. Kevin Kenworthy, turfgrass scientist presents “**New Turf Varieties and Mixed Species.**”

UF is constantly experimenting with turf that consumes less water; an astonishing number of cultivars are being developed, including Bermudas, which are making a comeback.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r53v6L2lePs>

Caitlin Sollazzo, DPM (Doctor of Plant Medicine) and commercial horticulture agent at Manatee County Extension, has hosted an easy-to-understand presentation “**Turfgrass Diseases and their Management.**” She helps you diagnose disease issues and how to treat them.

bit.ly/3Hup14G

Lastly, Dr. Chris Marble's “**Understanding Homeowner Herbicides and Using them Safely**” is a MUST for every home gardener. Herbicides are incredibly complex; you must know the plant you're trying to kill and the proper herbicide to treat it. One of my favorite quotes (albeit discouraging) is Chris' advice on torpedo grass in the lawn: “get a real estate agent!”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wlu7EGqRiac>



Turfgrass
Photo Credit: UF/IFAS

NEW SUMMER HOURS AT THE MGV PLANT DIAGNOSTIC CLINIC

From June through August, the Master Gardener Volunteer Plant Diagnostic Clinic will now be open for in-person visits weekdays (except Wednesdays) from 10:00 A.M. to 2:00 P.M. or available by phone at 941-722-4524. This is a FREE service that we provide to the public.

The Master Gardener Volunteer Plant Diagnostic Clinic is located inside the UF/IFAS Extension Manatee County Office at 1303 17th St. W., Palmetto, FL 34221 or at our mobile plant clinics (See Page 2).

Questions can also be emailed to ManateeMG@gmail.com.

LIVE YOUR BEST LIFE

“The Bench” interviews Nelly Nelson, Family & Consumer Sciences Agent,
UF/IFAS Manatee County Extension

Nelly’s wide-ranging educational program encompasses everything from family finance and nutrition to disaster preparedness and couples’ classes to improve communication. The Extension’s Family and Consumer Sciences program provides research-based information to improve health and quality of life.

Nelly has been with Manatee County Extension since 2016 and amongst her many initiatives are “Living on My Own”, a financial class and simulation for high school juniors and seniors, and a sustainable gardening program that has installed thirteen vegetable gardens in Manatee County schools. Her latest effort is working with multiple non-profits and Manatee County Government to create the Food Security Network project for 100 families living in food “deserts” (areas with no ready access to grocery stores or markets).

One area of Nelly’s program that intrigued us was her classes at the Manatee County jail. Over 2,200 inmates have attended her classes on drug addiction recovery, relationships and parenting, financial management, and nutrition.


Fluent in English and Spanish, Nelly has managed to provide resources for the community in Spanish. She tailors her programs to the needs of our county and works with local government, non-profits, and other organizations to offer a wide array of classes. Child development, food safety, premarital workshops, aging well and housing all fall under Nelly’s capable management.

For more information, contact Nelly by email at nelly.nelson@ufl.edu.




Nelly Nelson


Photo Credit: Manatee County
Government



MANATEE COUNTY 4-H

Summer Day Camps






Animal Science Camp

- When: June 30th - July 3rd
- Who: 13 -16 (determined by age on Sept 1, 2024)
- Price: \$150.00 (scholarships available)


Explore fields relating to animal and veterinary science and participate in hands-on learning activities. Participants will gain animal handling experience while having the opportunity to visit and explore local farms and animal facilities.



Makers Camp


- When: July 14th - 18th
- Who: 10-13 (determined by age on Sept 1, 2024)
- Price: \$100 (scholarships available)

Discover a variety of projects that Manatee County 4-H has to offer! Learn from local experts and create projects in a variety of areas, from sewing and cooking to woodworking and electricity.




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SOLARIZATION: MANAGE LANDSCAPE PROBLEMS WITHOUT CHEMICALS

By Amy L. Stripe and Jim Haupt, Master Gardener Volunteers

We have many customers wanting to use “natural” or “non-chemical” means to eliminate pest insects, diseases, and weeds. While the use of the term “chemical” is largely misleading - table salt, for example, is the chemical sodium chloride (NaCl) – what people want to avoid are “synthetics.”

An excellent way to deal with pest problems without synthetics is through solarization, basically “cooking” the soil and everything within. This is not a once-and-done-process, but it is highly effective for vegetable gardens in order to rid them of nematodes (microscopic roundworms of which many feed on roots), diseases and weed seeds. Expect the pest-free “honeymoon” to last 3 to 4 months, during which you will hopefully have a nice harvest. Solarization also works on turf grass when you’re trying to eliminate problematic weeds and start again.

Solarization involves covering the planting area with thick CLEAR plastic in full sun in the hottest months of the year in Florida (typically June, July and August) for six weeks. You must clear the area of living vegetation and plant debris, moisten it, and anchor the plastic appropriately. (See <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/IN856> for a comprehensive beginner’s guide to solarization.)



UF/IFAS researcher Bob McSorley demonstrates soil solarization

Photo Credit: Tyler Jones, UF/IFAS

For information on nematodes (most of which are beneficial!) see the February 2022 issue of “The Bench” <https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/manatee/lawn--garden/garden-bench-newsletter/>

Yet more stuff on solarization:
<https://gardeningolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/care/pests-and-diseases/pests/management/soil-solarization/>

BECOME A MASTER GARDENER VOLUNTEER

Ready to dig in and grow your gardening knowledge and give back to your community? Become a Master Gardener Volunteer! Our comprehensive training class offers expert-led sessions on everything from soil science to pest management, equipping you with the skills to share your passion through meaningful volunteer opportunities.

Learn alongside fellow plant enthusiasts and make a real difference by contributing to local gardening projects, educational programs, and community green spaces. Sign up today and watch your gardening expertise blossom while making a tangible impact! Contact Mack Lessig at mlessig@ufl.edu or (941) 722-4524 ext.1821 for more information.

Classes Start: Fall 2025

Duration: 14 Weeks

Time/ Date: Wednesdays from 8:30 A.M. to 1:30 P.M.

Location: 1303 17th Street West, Palmetto, FL 34221

JOIN US FOR

Join us at 11:00 A.M. on June 19, 2025 for our Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ The Value of Trees event.

Located at: Palma Sola Botanical Park at 9800 17th Avenue Northwest Bradenton, FL 34209

Register online here: <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/florida-friendly-landscapingtm-the-value-of-trees-tickets-1146042757739?aff=oddtcreator>

SEAGRAPE – A WORK HORSE PLANT

By Sally Herb, Master Gardener Volunteer

A trip to the beach in Manatee County isn't complete without sighting a seagrape (*Coccoloba uvifera*). This fast grower with large, thick leaves striped with red makes it a standout in most landscapes. Tolerating both short periods of salt water during storm surges and regular salt spray makes it a natural for our coastline. It also does well inland although it is extremely cold sensitive (it will come back from the roots).

Another consideration is that it is semi-deciduous and the large leaves are very slow to decompose and considered "litter" by some. Clusters of small blooms appear in spring, with the fruit typically ripening in late summer. The seagrape tends to sprawl in its native coastal uplands and may grow up to 50' tall and 35' wide in Zones 9B-11. Don't let that intimidate you! It takes well to hand pruning and may be coaxed into a lovely tree. If shaped regularly for the first ten years, the reward is a beautiful, functional specimen.

Seagrapes trap sand in their leaves and branches helping to stabilize beaches. Their dense foliage also helps sea turtles by blocking artificial light from beaches.

Seagrape fruit is edible (sweet/sour) and may be made into jelly or wine. The bark resin has been used historically in tanning and dying.

It is dioecious, meaning separate male and female plants. If you're lucky, you'll have a female which will give you volunteer plants in the spring and summer!



Seagrape

Courtesy of Sally Herb



Seagrape

Courtesy of Sally Herb

Master Gardener Volunteer Amy Stripe & Joy Dersken, Co-Editors. Contents reviewed & edited by Extension staff.

Note change in Manatee County USDA Hardiness Zones! Majority of county is now 10A (annual extreme minimum temperature 30 – 35 degrees F) and 10B (35 – 40 degrees F.) Plants suited to only cooler zones (e.g., 9) may not thrive.

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The University of Florida is committed to providing universal access to all of our events. For disability accommodations such as sign language interpreters and listening devices, please contact our office at (941) 722-4524 at least 1 week in advance. Advance notice is necessary to arrange for some accessibility needs.

University of Florida IFAS Extension - Manatee County

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Website: <http://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/manatee/> Email: ManateeMG@gmail.com