



Anthurium, Tillandsia "sparkler", Bromeliad Neoregelia 'Inferno'



Anthurium

UF



Tillandsia

UF



Bromeliad

UF

## Holiday Plant Gifts

By Sally Herb, Master Gardener Volunteer

The traditional holiday red bloomers like amaryllis, poinsettia, and Christmas cactus are lovely. But there are a lot more plants to consider using, either for gifts or to decorate your home.

A red *Anthurium* is a great choice. These tropical plants have shiny, heart shaped leaves and showy flowers in a range of colors. They are wonderfully adapted to indoor living, require little care (water only when dry) and the blooms last for 6-8 weeks. With a bit of fertilizer and indirect sunlight, they will continue to bloom year-round.

Tillandsia are incredibly versatile. They are epiphytes (air plants) in the bromeliad family, getting all their nutrients from the atmosphere. Tillandsias will flourish both inside and out with a bit of water spritzing and good air circulation. A quick but stunning project is a grapevine wreath. Nestle the tillandsia in the vines, add a waterproof bow, and you have a unique door decoration. Best of all, you can swap out different color bows to use it year-round. Or select a shell and cool glue gun a tillandsia inside. The one pictured is called "Sparkler" and has a muted red fluorescence. If either of these is a gift, consider including a decorative mister (a not so subtle hint for required care!)

Bromeliads as a whole are another group to consider. Use these as a nice pop of color. Choose a bromeliad with either a colorful flower bract or brilliantly colored foliage. The pictured plant is *Neoregelia 'Inferno.'* It's also a great 'swap out' plant. If you have large potted indoor plants, dig out a small hole and insert a colorful bromeliad for a seasonal bit of color. Leave it in the pot for easy removal after the bloom fades. The easiest way to water is with a 'sink shower' being sure to drain excess water from the cup.

All these plants are perfect for both green and brown thumb gardeners. They require bright diffused light, minimal care, are extremely forgiving and long lasting. A bit of occasional water and you have a plant that will provide accent color for months. Brighten your holidays with a non-traditional plant!

For more information, visit: <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdf/EP/EP33700.pdf> .



# What's This?

## Teabush: Abuzz with Bees!

By Norma Kisida, Master Gardener Volunteer



While checking out the plants in the sundial area of our Manatee County Extension Master Gardener demonstration garden, I was fascinated by a plant that was literally buzzing with honeybees, native bees, and other pollinators. The small fuzzy leaves were a grayish green color which I found especially attractive along with the petite pink blossoms.

Being a fan of native plants, especially those that are good for pollinators, I quickly made a trip to a local native nursery to purchase one and came home with four! I have not been disappointed.

Teabush (*Melochia tomentosa* L), also known as pyramid bush, grayleaf, and

wooly pyramid flower, is a shrub native to south Florida. It is often found along roadsides as well as many other tropical areas. It grows 7-10 feet tall and wide if left unpruned and tolerates full sun and harsh conditions. Although it grows wild in more southern areas, it is an extremely attractive landscape plant in this area and is hardy in zones 8A – 11.

The small and abundant flowers, which bloom spring through fall, are pink to purple with a yellow center and attract many pollinators, especially bees.

For more information see:

[http://www.wildflower.org/plants/result.php?id\\_plant=METO4](http://www.wildflower.org/plants/result.php?id_plant=METO4)



**Q.** Dear Master Gardener Volunteer:

I found a bee colony at the top of my mahogany tree in my back yard. I'm not sure what I should do about it and if it is dangerous to me or to my neighbors. The (photograph) is not the bee colony in my tree but it looks similar. Please advise.

Thanks, L.S., Lakewood Ranch



**A.** Dear L.S.:

Thank you for contacting the Manatee County Master Gardener Volunteers.

The large mass of honeybees, *Apis spp.*, shown in your photograph is a swarm. The hive may have become overcrowded, and the colony split, rearing a new queen, and leaving to start a new hive. The mass of bees is surrounding and protecting a queen.

The bees may have moved out from someplace in this tree or they may just be resting as they search for a new, appropriate spot to start their next hive. While the mass of honeybees can be intimidating, they are unlikely to sting anyone in this state if left alone. Most likely, the swarm will be gone in 24-48 hours.

Honeybees are fascinating in their hierarchy; each bee has its place and a job to do that produces a perfect, cooperative hive that operates as a single unit.

The following link is to information about the honeybee for your reference.

<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/in1005>

*Master Gardener Volunteer Karen Holleran  
answers your email questions.*

*Send questions and/or photos for identification or for  
diagnosis of residential gardening problems to  
[ManateeMG@gmail.com](mailto:ManateeMG@gmail.com).*

*Or call us at 941-722-4524 weekdays from 9:00 A.M. to  
4:00 P.M. and press 1 to speak to the  
Master Gardener Diagnostic Plant Clinic.*



# Florida is the Winter Strawberry Capital of the World Join in!

By Maureen Hirthler, Master Gardener Volunteer

Red, plump, juicy sweet strawberries. Dark chocolate dipped strawberries. Strawberry shortcake. They can all be yours this winter.

Winter in Florida is the perfect time to plant strawberries. These low growing plants like a temperature between 50-80 degrees, less than 14 hours of daylight, and lots of full sun. Our Florida climate in late fall, winter, and spring is ideal for strawberries to flower and fruit.

So, we have you convinced, and you have decided to grow strawberries. What do you need to know to get them growing?

## **Getting Started:**

The University of Florida recommends the variety 'Festival' for central Florida. There is also 'Sweet Charlie.' You may need to shop around for these, but it will be worth it.

Plant your strawberries between September and November, and you should have fruit until May.

Most strawberry plants are grown from transplants. Be sure to check for pests and diseases when you purchase your plants. As always, soil is important for success. Most growers use raised beds with good quality garden soil to which a complete fertilizer with nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, and micronutrients has been added. You will not necessarily need to fertilize again. Strawberries also do well in large pots or container with good drainage.

Set the plants 12-18 inches apart in raised beds, and don't overload pots. This gives room for runners

which produce fruits and new plants. Make sure to not cover the crowns of transplants or leave roots exposed.

Watering depends upon your planting site and the age of the plants. New plants require frequent watering. Once young plants have become established, raised bed strawberries do best with drip or soaker irrigation for an hour a week, increasing to 2-3 times a week as the plants grow and the weather warms.

## **Keeping Them Going:**

If the temperature falls below freezing, the plants need to be protected by covering them with a sheet or some other non-plastic item.

Strawberries fall victim to our usual pests. You can find aphids, thrips, powdery mildew, mites, and caterpillars. Using Integrated Pest Management (IPM) is a good practice. Scout your plants daily for signs of pests. Use biological treatment with natural predators like ladybugs.

Evaluate your watering schedule for too wet or too dry conditions. Use mechanical means like picking off or hosing away pests. Horticultural soap/oil can be used if these measures fail, avoiding strong pesticides. If you do use pesticides, follow the label directions exactly. Copper fungicide is an excellent treatment for powdery mildew and other fungus problems.

## **For More Information:**

An excellent UF publication can be found by clicking on [Strawberries](#). Also: <https://gardeningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/plants/edibles/fruits/strawberries.html>



Male Io moth with plumb-like antennae

## WHAT'S THIS? The Io Moth

By Rob Hinz, Master Gardener Volunteer - Photos by Jan Hinz

In Greek mythology, Io was first priestess of Hera, wife of Zeus. Zeus loved Io and turned her into a heifer to camouflage and protect her from Hera's jealousy. During the day, the Io moth, *Automeris io*, uses its beautiful coloration as camouflage within its surroundings. Gene Stratton-Porter, a nature photographer, called the larva of the Io moth "Hera of the Corn." As a child, while playing hide-and-seek in the corn fields of Indiana, she received the stinging revenge of Queen Hera. The Io moth caterpillar (larva) is venomous!

The United States has seven species of Io moths. The species *A. io* and subspecies *A. io lilith*, are found in Florida. The moths range from the eastern half of the United States and Canada to eastern Mexico.

Adults are short-lived and do not eat. They have a small window of about two days for mating. After mating, the female lays a small cluster of eggs on the underside or the tops of the host plant leaves. Within 8 to 11 days, the larvae hatch. The larvae are voracious eaters, consuming their eggshells first, then the host plant. Io larvae are polyphagous: they feed on a smorgasbord of over 100 plants. For a list, see this website [http://entnemdept.ufl.edu/creatures/misc/io\\_moth.htm](http://entnemdept.ufl.edu/creatures/misc/io_moth.htm).

In Florida, they like hibiscus (*Hibiscus sp.*), Mexican fan palm (*Washingtonia robusta*), and red mangrove (*Rhizophora mangle*). I found caterpillars on my ixora (*Ixora spp.*).

In the fifth instar, the caterpillar is about 60 mm in length and bright green with a red and white lateral stripe. Seventy percent of the body is covered with two types of venomous, urticating (stinging) spines. The stinging occurs from touching or rubbing against them. These urticating barbed hairs break off the caterpillar, embed in the skin, and hurt like heck!

The adult moth is easily recognized because of its prominent hind eye-spots that appear when a moth at rest is startled.

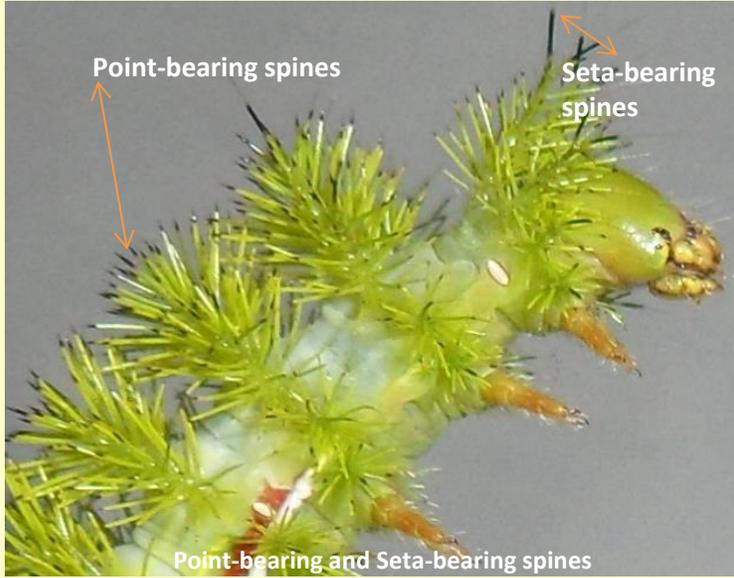
Predators of Io caterpillars include birds, mammals, and insect parasitoids that are not bothered by the larva's venom. Generally, a large infestation is not a problem for gardeners. Wearing gloves and scouting aid in avoiding painful stings. If stung, cellophane tape on the skin to remove the spines and application of ice are helpful. Contact a physician should symptoms get worse.

### References

- <https://www.fdacs.gov/content/download/4701/file/Urticating%20Caterpillar%20in%20Florida%201.%20o%20Moth.pdf>,
- [http://entnemdept.ufl.edu/creatures/misc/io\\_moth.htm](http://entnemdept.ufl.edu/creatures/misc/io_moth.htm),
- <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdf/IN/IN01400.pdf>,
- <http://fnpsblog.blogspot.com/2019/07/national-moth-week-io-moth-automeris-io.html>.



Fifth instar



Point-bearing spines

Seta-bearing spines

Point-bearing and Seta-bearing spines



Eggs and hatching larvae



Early stage instars



Opened cocoon showing black pupa, and sloughed white head capsule and larval spines



Male lo moth with eye



Female lo moth with eye spots



Female lo moth with antennae resembling teeth on a comb



## Sign of the Season: Poinsettias

By Maureen Hirthler, Master Gardener Volunteer

It's almost Christmas, the time of year with presents, cookies, and decorated trees. Although we won't have snow and might need to change our usual holiday plans (thanks to COVID-19), we will have gorgeous red poinsettias.

Most people are accustomed to temporarily decorating their home and landscape with poinsettias, or giving and receiving them as gifts, then disposing of them after the season. But in Florida, poinsettias (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) can be used as an accent in your landscape year-round. In fact, whilst these beauties are native to Mexico, Manatee and Sarasota counties boast two massive poinsettia nurseries.

Take good care of your temporary poinsettias. Keep them in a well-lit spot and water only when the top layer is dry. They like humidity, so a light misting can be helpful. When you are ready to plant, remove any flowers and cut the stems back to 6 inches.

Pick a site that gets at least 6 hours of sun each day, is as dark as possible at night, and is safe from freezing temperatures. In order to set flowers, poinsettias require long, dark, and cool nights.

Poinsettias like well-drained and slightly acidic soil. Set the plant in the ground at the same depth it was growing in the container. Firm the soil and water well. Water plant well until it becomes established. Fertilize with balanced amounts of nitrogen and potassium (no phosphorous) from March-October. Follow the package directions for how much and how often to feed.

Pinch back your plants several times over the summer to encourage growth and a bushy form. You will need to prune your poinsettias back to 12-18 inches in the spring after flowering.

It's often inexpensive to buy poinsettias after the holiday, just in time to plant them in your landscape. For more information <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ep349>



# Wanted: Air Potato Beetles

By Alyssa Vinson, Residential Horticultural Agent,  
Manatee County UF/IFAS Extension

Homeowner requests for air potato beetles (*Lilioceris cheni*) are frequent in the Master Gardener Volunteer Plant Clinic. At one time, beetles were available free of charge for control of air potato vine (*Dioscorea bulbifera*). This practice has been discontinued (see “Important Update” below) due to natural success in the spread of the beetle populations.

[Air Potato Vine](#) - prohibited by state statute – is originally from southeast Asia. In summer months it can grow up to **8 inches in a day**. It is most often found in disturbed urban sites or in the urban/wild land interface. This vine can smother native and other desirable plants. It has a seasonal growth habit, with new vines sprouting from underground tubers (the “potatoes” more correctly called bulbils) in the spring, vigorous vegetative growth throughout the summer months, and dormancy in the late fall through winter.

To control the air potato vine invasion, organizations and academic institutions sought biological control options. A biological control is a pest or disease from the native region of the invasive plant species. In Asia, scientists found a small, charismatic beetle feeding on the vine. It was discovered that this beetle **ONLY** eats air potato vine. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Sciences/Division of Plant Industry (FDACS/DPI) and UF/Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) are the main collaborators on the program that studies and raises the beetles. Hundreds of thousands of the beetles have been released in Florida since approved for release in 2012.

The beetles exhibit a similar seasonal pattern of boom and bust as the target vine, with populations reproducing throughout the summer. The females feed on and lay eggs on the underside of air potato leaves. During the fall and winter while the vine is dormant, so are the beetles. Beetle feeding results in a significant decrease in vine density and bulbil production.



However, this does not result in complete eradication of the vine. Beetles are effective in combination with other control methods, including:

- Collecting and disposing of bulbils (very effective in early fall after beetles have slowed down bulbil reproduction, resulting in fewer potatoes to dispose of.) **DO NOT** put bulbils in your compost pile or in regular garden waste. They will resprout. Put them out with your normal household garbage, dunk in bleach for several days, or stash in the freezer for 24 hours.
- Pulling and disposing of seedlings and vines.
- Using an [approved herbicide](#) to reduce vine vigor.

**Important Update:** Due to the current success of beetle populations, the USDA/ARS and FDACS/DPI, collaboration to take homeowner requests for beetles has ended. They have issued a statement which clearly outlines when beetles may be available for large infestations:

<https://www.fdacs.gov/content/download/92086/file/Air-Potato-Beetle-Distribution-Update.pdf>

**More information: Air Potato Beetle Fact Sheet:**  
<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdf/IN/IN97200.pdf>

**Air Potato Beetle Request Instructions:**

<https://www.freshfromflorida.com/Divisions-Offices/Plant-Industry/Bureaus-and-Services/Bureau-Of-Methods-Development-Biological-Control/Biological-Control/Air-Potato-Vine-Biological-Control>

