Plants for use in a Traditional African American Yard in Miami-Dade:

Ornamentals– Trees, Shrubs and Vines

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Trees, Shrubs andVines

In Westmacott's survey of African-American yards he commented on the scarcity of shrubs, especially evergreens, as compared to white owned yards. Where shrubs were used they tended to be used singly planted at random in the swept yard, rather than in groups (i.e. as a screen or hedge). Shrubs were divided into separate groups: those grown principally for their flowers, or those grown for foliage. Also included in these lists are a number of small trees, however there is no mention of any large flowering trees. Shade trees were sometimes seen, usually oak, hickory, walnut or pecan. Since most of the shrubs and trees listed in this survey are not suitable for Miami-Dade, they were eliminated. Since the same is true for vines (treated separately by Westmacott) all of theses plants have been combined into one shortened list. Where possible, substitute plants are suggested that have similar visual appeal.

Roses and azaleas were jointly the most popular flowering shrubs grown, with rose of Sharon third placed. Of these three plants only the rose is amenable to successful cultivation in South Florida. **Azaleas** may be maintained in the landscape for more than one season in Miami-Dade if sufficient care is taken over site selection (shifting shade), soil preparation (like gardenias they require an acid soil) and choice of varieties. Survival is better if they are grown in containers/raised beds placed in an area that receives some afternoon shade.

Rather than growing rose of Sharon (*Hibiscus syriacus*), the related Chinese hibiscus (*Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*) is a much more appropriate choice for South Florida. There are many varieties available to provide vibrantly colored flowers, that essential element associated with a traditional African American yard.

After roses the remaining flowering shrubs are discussed in order of their frequency of use in the landscapes surveyed by Westmacott – some of the less frequently found shrubs are included if they are adapted to south Florida conditions. Detailed fact sheets on most of these shrubs are available from local county extension offices and should be consulted before installing them in the landscape.

Roses (*Rosa* spp.) Modern hybrid tea roses can be grown in South Florida if they are grafted onto a *Rosa fortuniana* rootstock, and time can be devoted to watering and feeding as well as spraying for disease. It is essential when growing roses to prepare a bed containing rich, moisture-retentive, organic soil and spreading organic mulch to a depth of 2-3" after installing the plants. Alternatively, roses can be grown in containers or a raised bed, though the plants will require more frequent watering. To successfully grow roses they require at least 6 hours of full sun in a site providing excellent air circulation and freedom from competition with tree roots. Consideration should be given to growing some of the so-called heirloom roses[1]: chinas, teas, noisettes and some bourbon roses are all well suited to South Florida and require much less spraying for

[1] For further information consult the publication "Old Roses for South Florida" available from the Miami-Dade Extension Office, or download at: http://miami-dade.ifas.ufl.edu/programs/urbanhort/programs/Old-Roses-for-South-Florida.PDF

disease and are generally more tolerant of drought than hybrid teas. Some can even be grown on their own roots, and are therefore ideal plants to give as cuttings for friends, relatives and neighbors to plant in their yards Indeed the custom of passing on plant cuttings was common in African American communities throughout the South and is in part responsible for many old roses surviving to the present day.

Crepe Myrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica*) This native of India is a long time favorite of Southern gardens. Hybrid and none-hybrid cultivars are available from miniatures such as 'Chickasaw' to various dwarf, semi-dwarf, intermediate to tree size specimens all with crinkled crepe like flowers. Flower panicles (clusters) are produced during late spring in various shades of pink, purple, red and lavender as well as white. Crepe myrtle looses all of its leaves during winter (deciduous), which turn an attractive red and orange before falling to the ground, giving a rare hint of fall color to the South Florida landscape. This is a very adaptable shrub that does well in South Florida, and can be considered a low maintenance plant.

The one drawback to crepe myrtles is the fact that many varieties are very susceptible to powdery mildew that disfigures both leaves and blooms. Apart from 'Chickasaw' (20" miniature with pinkish lavender flowers), other resistant varieties are available with flowers ranging from white to pink, red and lavender. These include semi dwarfs ('Acoma', 'Hope', and 'Tonto'), intermediates ('Apalachee', 'Commanche', 'Lipan', 'Osage', 'Osage blush' and 'Sioux') and the largest sized (tree) varieties ('Fantasy', 'Miami', 'Natchez' and 'Tuscarora').

Queen crepe myrtle (*Lagerstroemia speciosa*) is a moderate to large tropical tree (from India) with extremely showy blossom (the pink cultivar 'Nong Nooch' is especially attractive) that is sometimes seen as a street tree in Miami-Dade. *L. speciosa* is deciduous under South Florida conditions, and can exhibit nutritional deficiencies on the limestone rock of Miami-Dade.

Container grown crepe myrtles are best planted during spring when they are in active growth, choosing a site in full sun with free draining soil. Mulch and apply a light application of slow release palm special fertilizer twice a year. Removal of dead flowers will extend the period of bloom, whilst pruning is best done during the winter when the shrub is dormant. Flowering occurs on new growth so extensive pruning during the spring should be avoided. Once established lagerstroemias are well adapted to drought, however they are not tolerant of salt and can show nutritional deficiencies (manganese) on limestone.

Camellia (*Camellia japonica*). Camellias are not widely available in South Florida, being better adapted to conditions further north in the state. Since the native soil in Miami-Dade is too alkaline, they are easier to grow in large containers. There are some varieties that are better adapted to south Florida, which can be grown in the landscape if care is taken to prepare the soil. Such varieties include: 'Alba Plena' (early flowering double white), 'Debutante' (early flowering, double pale pink), 'Prof. C. S. Sargent' (early flowering, double red – more tolerant of full sun) and 'Gigantea' (very large variegated double flowers).

In the landscape prepare a bed containing plenty of organic material such as fresh compost, Canadian peat or coir so that the soil retains moisture but is not

heavy. After the plants are installed, spread a 3" layer of pine bark mulch and apply an acid forming fertilizer. During periods of dry weather camellias will need to be watered, a deep watering every 10 days if in the landscape, more if in a container. Camellias planted in the Miami-Dade landscape are liable to develop nutritional deficiencies causing interveinal chlorosis (yellowish leaves with darker green veins). This can be corrected with a foliar application of a minor element mix that contains manganese and zinc (minor element mixes containing these and other trace elements are available from garden centers). Apply iron as a chelated iron soil drench (select one suitable for soils above pH 7.5).

There are several diseases and insect pests that affect camellias: various species of scale insects are the most significant pest, though aphids and mites can also be a problem. Canker is the most serious disease problem causing a dieback that necessitates removal of infected branches. There are also various leaf spotting diseases, petal blights and, in locations where the soil remains too wet, root and crown rots.

Hydrangea (*Hydrangea* spp.) South Florida conditions are not conducive to growing hydrangeas. There are some plants that can substitute, especially *Dombeya* cultivars such as 'Rosemound' and 'Seminole'. **Dombeyas** are small trees or shrubs found mainly in E. and S. Africa, producing spherical clusters of flowers in white, pink, yellow or red, that are commonly referred to as tropical snowball or hydrangea tree. The leaves are simple, soft textured usually lobed (some resemble a maple leaf) with a long stalk.

Dombeya spp. cultivars such as 'Seminole' are more compact and less coarse than the parent plants, with more conspicuous blooms that are less hidden by foliage and closely resemble the Hortensia (mop head) cultivars of *Hydrangea macrophylla* (e.g. 'Générale Vicomtesse de Vibraye'). Maximum flowering coincides with south Florida's dry season (November until March), though blooms can appear earlier in the fall. Spent blooms turn an unattractive brown and should be removed to prevent litter and to encourage further flowering. Dombeyas should be planted in full sun to slight shade, and are moderately drought tolerant once established. Unlike hydrangeas, flower color is not influenced by soil pH. During winter leaves can turn a reddish brown and drop as temperatures fall below 50°F.

One other group of plants that have been used in tropical landscapes to simulate the effect of hydrangeas are the *Euphorbia* x *lomi* Poysean hybrids, extremely showy plants derived from the familiar **crown of thorns**, *Euphorbia milii*. These have the advantage of being low maintenance plants that can be grown on Miami-Dade limestone in full sun with only occasional applications of fertilizer. The only imperatives are an open free draining soil and a site that is not liable to flood.

Gardenia (*Gardenia augusta syn. G. jasminoides*, native to E. Asia) Cultivars of *G. augusta* are favorites of Southern gardens, however other cultivated *Gardenia* spp. are found throughout the old world tropics including Africa. Indeed, to successfully grow *G. augusta* in the south Florida landscape it needs to be grafted onto a nematode resistant species of gardenia (*G. thunbergia*) native

to South Africa. Also necessary for success is an acid, moist, organic soil with good drainage in a site with some partial shade. Mineral deficiencies, especially iron, can develop on the alkaline soils of Miami-Dade, as well as black sooty mold due to infestation with either whitefly or scales. There are many cultivars of *G. augusta* that make excellent container plants.

Gardenia taitensis is a recently introduced species from Polynesia that is more drought tolerant and less demanding nutritionally than *G. augusta*, growing well on the limestone of Miami-Dade. This gardenia has large, deep green, very glossy leaves, and does not develop the chlorotic (yellow) leaves often seen on *G. augusta* grown in Miami-Dade. Another advantage is the lighter fragrance, for those who find *G. augusta* overpowering, and fewer pest problems. The flowers are single and solitary, at the branch tips, with 6-8 white petals fused at the base, fading to a light buff. *Gardenia volksenii* is a South African native, also drought tolerant, with simple but striking ivory to butter yellow, fragrant blooms. Both *G. taitensis* and *G. volksenii* are much larger than most *G. augusta* cultivars, becoming 20-30' small trees, but usually grown as large shrubs.

Magnolia (*Magnolia* spp.) Of the two magnolias listed in Westmacott's survey, Southern magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*) native to the S.E. United States was the most popular. This was followed by the saucer magnolia, *M* x *soulangeana*, a cross derived from two Chinese species. *M. grandiflora* is better adapted to alkaline soils, but is still liable to suffer from nutritional deficiencies, particularly iron, on the pervasive limestone found throughout Miami-Dade. It is easier to grow one of the dwarf cultivars of *M. grandiflora*, such as 'Little Gem', in a large container where there is more control over soil conditions. *M. virginiana* (sweet bay) is the only species found naturally in Miami-Dade where it occurs in Everglades' hammocks. It is available from some local specialty nurseries. Though not as particular to soil as other species, it is not tolerant of drought and is best planted in areas where the soil remains moist. Apart from concerns over soil, magnolias grown in Miami-Dade are very prone to damage from scale insects, as well as a number of leaf spotting diseases and, where the soil remains too wet, crown and root rots.

As an alternative to growing *Magnolia*, there are tropical species of the closely related genus *Michelia*, (such as *M. champaca*), that are better suited to South Florida's heat and humidity. Scale insects may still be a problem as well as iron deficiency, though not as pronounced. As with magnolias, *M. champaca* should be grown in a sheltered site, preferably with some partial shade and well mulched. The tree requires moist soil to thrive, though an established tree will withstand temporary dry spells.

Some of the trees and shrubs listed in Westmacott's survey were grown primarily for their foliage. Of these, **privet** (*Ligustrum vulgare*) was encountered most frequently, though **Japanese privet** (*Ligustrum japonicum*) was also grown. This latter is the better choice for South Florida, however like many other privets it is very prone to whitefly and scales and the black sooty mold associated with these pests. Although not growing as dense as the common privets, the native **Florida privet**, *Forestiera segregata* is far less prone to pest

problems, possesses excellent salt tolerance and is well adapted to the alkaline soils of Miami-Dade. In African American yards surveyed by Westmacott where privet was found it was grown as a specimen shrub and not as a hedge. Red tip photinia, *Photinia glabra*, was the second most popular foliage shrub and as it does not succeed in South Florida, consider using the red tip variety of native **coccoplum** (*Chrysobalanus iaco*) as a substitute.

Of the remaining foliage shrubs, substitute **Southern red cedar** (*Juniperus silicicola*) for Eastern red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) and the native **Krug holly** (*Ilex krugiana*) for those hollies that are better adapted to more temperate climates. There are 'traditional' hollies with red berries that are able to grow in South Florida: **Dahoon holly**, *Ilex cassine* and cultivars, as well as the **Schelling's dwarf variety** of *Ilex vomitoria*. While Dahoon holly is better adapted to acid soils rather than the highly alkaline soils of Miami-Dade, it will grow here. Soil should be kept moist, with regular watering during periods of dry weather. Although not a true holly, the **Singapore holly** (*Malpighia coccigera*) has miniature holly-like leaves and showy pink flowers. Depending on the variety chosen this can be grown as a small shrub (to 3') or a ground cover in partially shaded areas where soil nematodes are not a problem.

Loquat (*Eriobotrya japonica*) was found in a few of the survey gardens and is an excellent choice for Miami-Dade, growing into a small, attractive, winter flowering tree with the bonus of delicious fruit. For superior fruit choose known varieties. In southern states, freezes often destroy the flowers resulting in unreliable fruit production, however this is not a problem in south Florida. Ripening fruit is however often infested with the Caribbean fruit fly.

Dwarf Palmetto (*Sabal minor*) is a hardy low growing palm that was occasionally encountered in the gardens surveyed. It is far more common in north and parts of central Florida, is frequently found in the southeastern U.S. where it forms part of the woodland understory. Dwarf palmetto is a drought tolerant low maintenance plant growing to about 6' with large palmately divided leaves. It is relatively easy to establish in partially shaded areas having poor soil, areas where few other palms would succeed. Scrub palmetto (Sabal etonia) is similar having smaller frond, but is restricted to the drier soils of peninsular Florida. The **sabal** or **cabbage palm** (*Sabal palmetto*) was also recorded in Westmacott's survey, particularly in South Carolina, where as in Florida it is the state tree. This palm, which grows to 30-40' is frequently seen (probably over used) in local landscapes, having the advantage of relatively low maintenance once established. The one serious pest, for which there is no effective control, is the palmetto weevil. Stressed and newly installed palms are most susceptible to attack.

Wax Myrtle (*Myrica cerifera*) is a pioneer plant in many natural Florida locations, and eventually grows into a small evergreen tree or shrub, if not pruned. An undemanding plant that is prone to develop extensive root suckers, and susceptible to several fungal diseases affecting foliage, stems and roots. Sometimes used as a hedge, but is reported to be poorly adapted to pruning. A recently introduced insect pest (lac scale) is capable of infesting a broad range of plants, including several native species, and is especially severe on wax myrtles.

***Podocarpus* spp.** were only occasionally encountered in Westmacott's survey, but in south Florida these are quite widely grown plants, used as free standing trees for shade, trimmed as tall hedges and adaptable to shearing into various forms (particularly the yew podocarpus – *Podocarpus macrophyllus*). Most species in cultivation are from Japan/China, however a number of African species, including weeping podocarpus, have been assigned to a new genus, *Afrocarpus* (see the section on ornamental plants native to Africa)). In the landscape choose an area with free draining soil, in full sun to partial shade. As a hedge, the plant will fill in more successfully in full sun. A good choice as a shade tree where there are concerns over damage from tree roots. Moderately drought tolerant, the plants respond to adequate soil moisture, but avoid wet soils, and applications of fertilizer twice a year.

Vines Woody vines were grown in less than a third of all yards surveyed by Westmacott, with *Wisteria sinensis* the most frequently encountered. Wisteria is not successful in Miami-Dade, however there are plants that can successfully substitute.

Queen's Wreath, *Petrea volubilis*, has hanging racemes of flowers with deep violet blue petals surrounded by lighter blue sepals, which are retained after the petals fall fading to a bluish gray. The leaves are simple, dark green, though often lighter in Miami-Dade, and have the feel of sandpaper. Prefers an enriched slightly acidic soil, but it still grows well in the alkaline soils of Miami-Dade, and full sun. Moderately drought tolerant, however the appearance is improved if soils are kept evenly moist.

Another substitute for wisteria, *Milletia reticulata* (**tropical wisteria**), grows to 20-30' and requires a sturdy support. The flowers are dark lavender to a rich purple, fragrant and borne in erect clusters from late spring into early summer. Plant in full sun and deadhead to encourage continued flowering.

You may wish to expand the scope of your garden to include landscape plants native to Africa. If so use go to the section on African plants that are suitable for the Miami-Dade landscape.