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Suddenly Summer!

Greetings fellow Master Gardeners. I hope you will be able to find some shade and stay cool this summer. We are again in hurricane season, so remember to prepare. I will certainly take this year more seriously than ever before. I am already armed and ready with a camp stove to make coffee in the event of another extended power outage!

Sunflowers – A Summer Delight

By Linda Smock, Master Gardener Volunteer. Photo credit: UF/IFAS

Many of us remember watching sunflowers as children and being amazed that they turn toward the sun, moving with it throughout the day. We’ve watched children be just as excited about them. We’ve also watched birds such as cardinals enjoy the seeds, whether on the plant or in a feeder. We’ve been amazed at the varieties that have emerged over the years, giving us many choices from which to select.

A favorite of many is the Florida native beach sunflower (*Helianthus debilis*) (shown at right). This plant grows along the beaches but also does well inland. These plants prefer sandy soil and love the addition of compost. They germinate normally in the spring with temperatures between 46-50 and grow when temperatures are in the 70s and 80s. This beautiful native flowers anytime the temperatures are above freezing. Beach sunflower dies back with freezes, but resprouts from the roots and reseeds. Because it grows only to be two to three feet high, it is often used as a ground cover.





Swamp sunflower (*Helianthus angustifolius*) is another Florida native plant that we can add to our gardens. It is sometimes called narrow-leaf sunflower. It grows in wet areas such as swamps but also does well in rain gardens. It grows taller (three to six feet) than the beach sunflower, and blooms profusely with clusters of yellow flowers in late summer and fall. It grows in full sun or partial sun and likes sandy acidic soil that is moist. It is a pollinator magnet.

There are plenty of Florida-Friendly sunflowers available to us also. They are available in a wide range of colors, sizes, and heights. There are dwarf versions and tall ones that reach as high as 12 feet. Most of us think of the *Helianthus annuus*. These short-lived annuals produce large, striking flowers, grow to five to six feet tall, and have bright yellow ray florets and brown central disk florets that produce seeds. You may see birds perched on them, pecking at the forming seeds.

Most sunflowers move to track the sun, especially when they are young. This is called heliotropism. After the flower is fully open, the blossom faces east and is ready to be pollinated (anthesis stage).

When choosing sunflowers, as always, consider *Right Plant-Right Place*. Full sun is always best. Consider the soil, whether you want to attract birds when they are in seed, and where you can watch and enjoy them! Choose from natives and Florida Friendly plants, including Sunrich, Van Gogh, Moulin Rouge, Strawberry Blonde, Buttercream, Short Stuff, and Teddy Bear.

It is the beginning of our summer season, so the perfect time to add sunflowers to your garden. The birds, bees, and butterflies will reward you with their presence.

Wanted: TREES! (Dead or Alive)

By Charlotte Vaughn, Master Gardener Volunteer. Photos by Charlotte Vaughn except as noted.

Have you joined the **NeighborWood Watch**? Here's why you should!

We all know that trees offer numerous benefits, including improved air and water quality, reduced energy costs, enhanced storm water management, and increased property values. They also provide aesthetic value, habitat for wildlife, noise reduction, and contribute to the social and economic well-being of communities. Did you know that **dead** trees can support 2-3x more biodiversity than living trees? A single large dead tree, such as the one pictured on page 3, can support over 1,000 species, from microbes to mammals. Studies in temperate forests suggest that 20–40% of forest-dwelling species depend on deadwood at some point in their life cycle.



This dead oak tree near McKay Creek at Florida Botanical Garden is still able to support many species of life.

Cavities or holes in trees are required nesting sites for 25 bird species in Florida (including several endangered species). Nest sites for cavity-nesters usually are in shorter supply than food and water. Dead trees (snags) often are removed from forests, parks, and yards. Whenever possible, snags should be left for birds; however, if you are concerned that a dead tree may fall, it can be shortened to create a wildlife pole or the snag can be supported with cables. Leaving the stump or a portion of the trunk can reduce the cost of tree removal services, saving you money while you save biodiversity!



A Red-bellied Woodpecker (Melanerpes carolinus) has made a home in this dead palm snag.

As Florida's natural forests are converted to other land uses, snags and wildlife poles in urban areas can serve as much-needed refuges for birds, bugs, and other organisms. Next time you see a dead tree, instead of wondering why it hasn't been removed, I hope you'll be excited to welcome it to the NeighborWood!

Reference:

<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/UW058>



Photo courtesy of Jiri Hulcr, UF/IFAS



A New Direction for the Weedon Island Native Pollinator Garden

By Vicki Critchlow, Master Gardener Volunteer. Photo by Sue Fraser.

In 2020, the Weedon Island Preserve staff reached out to the Pinellas County Master Gardener Volunteer Program to replant and refurbish the existing pollinator demonstration garden located across from the visitors' center. Over the past several years, a small group of Master Gardener Volunteers have dedicated many hours to the garden. We researched and added native pollinators, recently focusing on plants that tolerate brief salt water intrusion, performed extensive and ongoing maintenance of the garden, and designed signs identifying the plants.

The Friends of Weedon Island have generously funded the costs of the plants and signs.



The native pollinator garden at Weedon Island Preserve

Staff with the Environmental Management Division of Pinellas County reached out to the preserve staff expressing their concern about the inclusion of plants in the garden that are not found naturally growing in the preserve. Even though the garden contains only Florida native plants, we have been asked to plant or maintain only those that exist at the preserve.

To meet this requirement, we will be removing several plants. A few of the plants are quite large, such as the wild lime (*Zantoxylum fagara*) and beach creeper (*Ernodea littoralis*). Some of the other plants that we will be removing are trailing blue porterweed (*Stachytarpheta jamaicensis*), scorpiontail (*Heliotropium angiospermum*), Simpson's stopper (*Myrcianthes fragans*), green eyes (*Berlandiera subacaulis*), and lanceleaf tickseed (*Coreopsis lanceolata*).



The County has provided us with a list of plants endemic to the preserve. Going forward, we will choose plants from this list to plant in the garden. Our criteria for selecting an appropriate plant are:

- it must be native to Florida and endemic to the preserve
- be a pollinator supporting plant
- be tolerant of saltwater inundation
- grow in partial shade
- be available from a local native plant nursery

We are currently reviewing the list and so far it appears that there are few plants that fit all of our requirements!

Note from Theresa Badurek and the Pinellas County Staff: Thank you Master Gardeners for your responsiveness, time, and care for the preserve!

Princess of the Night: One of the Ultimate Late Bloomers

By Ellen Mahany, Master Gardener Volunteer. Photos by Ellen Mahany.

Recently one evening, I was pleasantly surprised by the sudden appearance of a huge, gorgeous white flower within the leafy Carolina jasmine (*Gelsemium sempervirens*) that graces the top of my patio arbor.

In the sober light of the following morning, the magnificent flower had shrunk to fit inside a salmon- pink cover formed by the outer tepals. Then, to my continuing amazement, I noticed on the side of the arbor a large yellow and pink bud protruding from a cactus stem (pictured at right), predicting another night bloom.

This unexpected activity arose from long cacti stems that had shown no inclination to do anything but gradually multiply on the arbor that has supported them for several years. I barely noticed the pass-along plant from long ago. Now I was curious to learn the identity of this mysterious cactus.



Tepal-covered cactus bud ready to open



After some online research, I realized that my plant was one of several night-blooming cacti of the genus *Cereus*. They are the ultimate late bloomers for two reasons. First, the flowers open after sunset and shrivel in sunlight, typically blooming for only one night. Second, the plant does not bloom for the first few years. Finally, I found a possible identification, *Selenicereus grandiflora*. I sent four photos to Bonnie Desmond for verification. She contacted Marc Frank, extension botanist at the University of Florida Herbarium, who identified it as Princess of the Night (*Selenicereus pteranthus*).



Front View of Princess of the Night



Side View of Princess of the Night

According to Frank, "The two species are often confused and frequently misidentified on the internet." Princess of the Night is more common and widespread and found in Pinellas County. He made the identification through a comparison of the aureoles, the spikey round growths on the cacti stems.





A hairy bud protrudes from an aureole.

In an enlargement of the above photograph, Frank was able to examine the aureoles to identify “three short, sharp, conical spines,” found on Princess of the Night aureoles. In contrast, *S. grandiflora* has “16-18 elongated, slender (bristle-like) deciduous spines per aureole.” Crucial to the identification of cacti, aureoles are not only the source of spines but also flowers and new growth.

I am proud of my Princess of the Night with its magnificent blooms and fascinating characteristics. Imagine my disappointment to discover that it is listed as a caution species by the UF/IFAS Assessment. These non-native species “may have a negative impact on the economy, environment, or humans when introduced.”

Currently, I am not alarmed (but remain watchful), as this epiphyte grows harmoniously with thriving Carolina jasmine. My princess fascinates me through every stage, retaining her beauty even after blooming.



Princess of the Night, framed by Carolina jasmine, is lovely even in its spent form.

Submit Your Articles and Pictures to The Dirt

The Dirt is published January, April, June, and October for Master Gardeners by Master Gardeners. The deadline for the next issue is **October 10**. If you would like to submit an article or photo feature, see the following guidelines:

- Articles should be 250 to 300 words.
- NOTE! All images must be open source – i.e., your own work, photos from UF/IFAS, or an image for which you have been granted permission.
- The topic can be anything you would like to share to educate your fellow gardeners.
- You may send pictures, poetry, or garden-related articles.



- Submit only Word documents, not PDF, so that edits are possible. NOTE: If you do not have Word, you can email the content and images.
- Send tips or information about a community or Master Gardener project for a potential article.
- Include proper attribution for photos/images.
- Send submissions to Susan Ladwig at ladwig.susan@gmail.com

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