

Summer 2022, Issue 23

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**Veggie Garden**

Lima beans, pole beans, collards, pumpkin and more thrive this time of year. For a complete list, download the North FL Gardening Calendar: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/EP/EP45100.pdf>  
or The Florida Vegetable Gardening Guide: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/vh021>

*Save the Date*

Growing Local in  
St. Johns County

**October 21-22, 2022  
9 a.m.-3 p.m.**

For more information call 904-209-0430.  
Events include a plant sale, farm tours,  
educational sessions, and 4-H pumpkins.



# Houseplants for Health and Wellbeing

Terra Freeman, Urban and  
Commercial Horticulture  
Agent, UF/IFAS Extension  
St. Johns County

It is well known that plants and gardening can promote wellbeing. Most of you reading this are likely gardeners or plant enthusiasts who have first hand experience with the myriad benefits that caring for our green friends can impart. Caring for plants can improve our wellbeing by reducing stress, anxiety, depression, and insomnia. The presence of plants can decrease cortisol levels in our bodies. Why not bring these benefits into our living space? Houseplants engage our senses through color, touch, fragrance, and beauty, and typically require less inputs than outdoor gardens.

## My favorite houseplants:

### String of Hearts or Rosary Vine, *Ceropegia woodii*

The delicate purplish vining stems of this succulent are adorned with green marbled heart-shaped leaves with purplish undertones. It is most often planted as a hanging plant but can also be trained up a trellis or topiary frame. String of hearts is easy to grow in a west or south facing window; stronger light results in more vibrant color. Because it is a succulent, it requires very well-drained soil and prefers to dry out thoroughly between deep waterings (overwatering is a sure way to cause decline). Tubers of this plant can fill the pot, resembling rosary beads-

hence it's common name of Rosary Vine. It is happiest in a crowded pot and is easy to propagate by cuttings or tuber division. I find it easiest to place a pot of soil beneath the trailing plant and it will root on it's own. Once it is sufficiently rooted, you can cut it from the mama plant.

Its tiny, waxy, pinkish, vase-like flowers are lined with small hairs that serve to trap tiny flies. When the hairs whither away, the fly is released with a mass of pollen grains to transfer to the next flower visited. Because this plant is related to milkweed, the resulting seed pods resemble tiny milkweed pods.



# Houseplants for Health and Wellbeing

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## Purple Passion Vine, *Gynura aurantiaca*

Native to Indonesia and Java, this unique houseplant has beautiful soft, purple velvety leaves and stems. Prefers bright, indirect or filtered sunlight– mine thrives with the screen protection of an east-facing lanai. Keep soil moist, but well-drained – it has a tendency to rot if too wet in the cooler months. May produce tiny orange flowers, but they are malodorous and therefore typically removed. The purple passion vine grows rather quickly and adds a low-maintenance splash of color and texture to a room or patio. They can be susceptible to aphids, scale, mealybugs, whiteflies, and spidermites, however these are all relatively easy to treat with neem oil or insecticidal soap.

## Hindu Rope Vine, *Hoya carnosa* 'Compacta'

Native to East Asia and Australia, this curly leaved version of the wax plant (*Hoya carnosa*) is a bit more challenging to find than my other favorites and is priced at a premium. This is due to this succulents slow-rooting nature and snails pace growth rate– about 6 inches a year. Once it takes off though, you will have a gorgeous and relatively low-maintenance vine. The unique curly shaped leaves somewhat resemble a tortellini made of green wax, and the flowers grow in a ball-like cluster of tiny star-shaped fragrant pink and white flowers. Hoyas prefer bright, indirect light with high humidity (not a problem in Florida!). It's succulent nature prefers very well-drained soil, infrequent watering, and prefers to be potbound. It can be susceptible to mealybugs, scale, or aphids, all of which can be treated with horticultural oils or insecticidal soaps.



**References:** <https://hort.extension.wisc.edu/articles/string-of-hearts-ceropegia-woodii/>

<https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/gynura-aurantiaca/>

<https://wexnermedical.osu.edu/blog/houseplants-are-good-for-your-mental-health>

# Try a Little Wild in the Landscape

Gail Wheeler,  
Master Gardener Volunteer  
UF/IFAS Extension SJC

Florida wildflowers can serve as a valuable garden oasis for our insect and bird friends. Consider a small patch that can serve as a refuge and bring nature home to your yard. Try a dedicated corner of your landscape, or plant a wildflower circle around a bird bath or water feature. Summer heat tolerant wildflowers in the 9-11 zones include some brilliantly colored flowers and can handle those summer droughts when they do occur.



butterfly weed  
*Asclepias tuberosa*  
Photo by Vie Ramey  
© 2002 University of Florida

Milkweeds and Butterfly weed (*Asclepias* spp.) provide nectar for butterflies and serve as larval host plants

Tickseed (*Coreopsis* spp.) is a perennial that blooms electric yellow daisy-like flowers mainly in the spring and summer and required full sun. Propagation is by seed and they readily self-sow.

Scarlet Sage (*Salvia coccinea*) is Florida's only native sage with red blossoms, although it can also bloom in pink and white. It is a short-lived perennial but readily reseeds and is drought tolerant.

Want a little blue in the wildflower patch? Spiderwort (*Tradescantia ohiensis*) grows in disturbed sites and is drought tolerant. It's little blooms only last a few hours, but they spread by underground rhizomes, so you'll have a lasting supply of this delicate little beauty.

Seaside Gentian (*Eustoma exaltatum*), with its lavender to dark purple blooms, propagates by seed and thrives in a variety of conditions. With a height of 2 feet, it blooms most of the year and will tolerate light shade.

When established in the right place, wildflowers can be carefree - requiring no fertilizers and little to no supplemental water—and the wildlife will thank you.

Happy Gardening!



*Eustoma exaltatum*  
Photo and © by Roger Hammer  
Wildflowers of the Everglades

# Take Time for Thyme

Pat Ludwig, Jane Palmer, Linda Mundy, and Pam Hutcherson  
Master Gardener Volunteers  
UF/IFAS Extension SJC

Have you ever considered growing thyme in your garden? Thyme is a genus of about 350 species of aromatic perennial herbs in the mint family, Lamiaceae, and native to Europe, North Africa, and Asia. Thyme has a rich history in culinary, medicinal, and ornamental uses.

Ancient Egyptians used it for embalming.

Ancient Greeks used it in their baths and burnt it as incense in their temples, as a symbol of sophistication and courage. The Romans used it to purify their rooms and give “aromatic flavor to cheese and liqueurs”. Many cultures use thyme in their reproductive and digestive systems, as well as in treating melancholy and sleeplessness.

Today, many varieties of thyme thrive in Florida as they desire full sun and are incredibly drought tolerant herbs. Just as in olden times, thyme continues to be used for culinary, medicinal, and ornamental applications. Thyme varieties are plentiful, ranging from golden to green to variegated. Some varieties include:

- ◆ Common thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*), most used for its decorative and culinary uses, is versatile and easy to grow from seeds or cuttings. Often considered a spring garden herb, it can reach a height of 12-18 inches and 16 inches in



width. This common thyme is an evergreen subshrub with grey-green leaves that are highly aromatic. It has pink or purple flowers, revealed in early summer. Many hybrids and cultivars have been developed for ornamental uses, differing colors, leaf shapes and essential oils.

- ◆ Lemon Thyme (*Thymus x citriodorus*) is often used as a border or container plant as it has attractive lemon-scented foliage. It is a bee attractor and facilitates the pollination of other plants. Lemon thyme is a low growing shrub that is easy to cultivate and has numerous gastronomical uses. The lemon aroma is at its peak in the morning, which is also the perfect time to harvest it. The oils of the lemon thyme are an excellent mosquito-repellant.

- ◆ Woolly Thyme (*Thymus pseudolanuginosus*) is a perennial herb, cultivated for its medicinal, culinary, and ornamental uses. It can grow in the cracks between pavers and rock gardens, and in a drought tolerant garden. The USDA recommends its use up to Zone 8, but it can grow in Zone 9 where it has a bit of shelter from the hot afternoon sun. This hardy herb will grow slowly to create a thick mat of foliage, mostly spreading 18 inches in width and up to 12 inches in height.

# Take Time for Thyme

Pat Ludwig, Jane Palmer, Linda Mundy, and Pam Hutcherson  
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Thyme is susceptible to root rot, so take care to avoid wet conditions when planting and maintaining. Insect pests that target thyme include spider mites, aphids, or thrips. These pests can be controlled chemically by using neem oil or insecticidal soaps, or biologically by encouraging lady beetles, mantises, spiders, wasps, or other beneficial insects to enjoy a meal of these pests.

There are many recipes that call for thyme. While some call for the use of the stem and leaves, most use the leaves of the thyme plant. These leaves add the flavor of mint or lemon and can be used fresh or dried. Thyme is an important herb in preparation of cheeses, fish, shellfish, salad dressings, soups, stews, stuffing, tomato sauces and vegetables. And this versatile herb is also used in salt substitute recipes. Thirsty? Thyme makes a wonderful tea, served hot with honey or a wedge of citrus, or cold with an infusion of apple or peach slices.

Looking for more information on thyme and herb gardening? Please refer to UF/IFAS online or publications.

Happy gardening...  
and always take time  
for Thyme!



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# Change Management in the Garden

Dianne Battle,  
Master Gardener Volunteer,  
UF/IFAS Extension SJC

When I moved to Florida, one of the first things I did was to complete the Master Gardener Volunteer program. The lessons I learned have served me well, especially the first principle of Florida-Friendly Landscaping™, “right plant, right place.” Over the years, however, I’ve learned that what once was the right place is no longer so. Sometimes things change that you’d never predict, such as my neighbor deciding to cut down her row of cedar trees planted along her property line a decade after I’d installed shade-tolerant plants. I am now in the process of installing sun-loving species (and hoping my neighbor does not decide to install a new privacy hedge).

Some deleterious changes can be avoided with a little forethought. For instance, the Freedom Native Plant Butterfly Garden (which is maintained cooperatively by Master Gardener Volunteers and members of the Garden Club of Switzerland) has been affected by decreased light availability. At the time the garden was installed, the area was sunny. But the west side of the garden backed up to a grove of oak trees which have grown, turning roughly half of the area shady.

Changes to the surrounding environment can help improve conditions. For instance, to compensate for the lack of light, we have had the oaks pruned, but that provided only a little bit more sun. The existing sun-lovers still persist, but they no longer bloom. We are in the process of transplanting them to better locations. We are now focusing on installing shade-tolerant native plants that have wildlife value as hosts, and not as flowering nectar sources. Changes within the garden are required to compensate for unavoidable external changes.

We also scrutinized the plants in the traditionally sunny areas. By studying the amount of shade created by the largest plants we are deciding which plants to remove or alter to allow sunny bloomers to once again provide nectar. Transplanting or trimming these plants opens up larger sunny areas. The garden is meant to provide visitors with a walking tour of the native plants. Unfortunately, several of the bushes and woody-stemmed perennials have crowded our walkway and need trimming or removal for safety. Planting for predicted future growth saves a lot of remedial management in the future.

In short, the first principle of Florida Friendly Landscaping™ could more accurately be stated as, “right plant, right place now and in the foreseeable future.” And when the unexpected happens, have a plan B.



# Fairy Gardens for Your Mental Health

Patty Plourde  
Master Gardener Volunteers  
UF/IFAS Extension SJC

The sight of a young child laughing and playing outside often brings a smile to our face. We find nothing more pleasing than to watch a giggling child engage in imaginative and creative play while connecting with nature. Perhaps there is more to this than meets the eye. When was the last time we, as adults, took a deep breath, let go of our worries, and allowed ourselves to drift into a world of fantasy while connecting with nature?

In today's world more people than ever are feeling the strain of mental health. Feelings of anxiety and depression have become common in people of all ages. Anxiety disorder affects 31.9% of adolescents between the ages of thirteen and eighteen. Nationwide nearly one in five people are living with a mental health condition (Mental Health America, 2020). However, studies have also shown a positive relationship between having a connection to nature, creativity, and increasing the ability to cope with life during challenging times.

There are several outdoor activities that can help us take care of our minds and bodies by getting us outside and exploring. Having the opportunity to explore a fairy garden has proven to have a therapeutic element that improves the mental and physical health of people of all ages. For



example, studies have shown fairy gardens on hospital grounds of cancer patients have increased patient optimism as well as overall health. This increase of positivity holds true not just for patients but also their families and medical caregivers. (Van der Riet, Thorsby, 2017)

Take a moment to enjoy creative little fairy houses and imagine how a garden might look when plants are blooming, but do not stop there.

When visiting a fairy garden, you can talk to the fairies, listen to their voices in the wind, and create your own story. You can even imagine dragons in the garden. What are the dragons going to do? Are the fairies safe? Let your imagination takeover. Sit quietly, watch, and listen. You will be surprised that the stress of the day will disappear.

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# Oakleaf Hydrangeas Give Personality to the Shaded Garden

Renee Stambaugh  
Master Gardener Volunteer  
UF/IFAS Extension SJC

The Oakleaf Hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia*) is a wonderful American native shrub for partly shady places in the landscape. A dramatic, white-blooming shrub with four seasons of interest, it is an understory shrub, requiring the shade of large oaks and the like.

The large, glow-in-the-dark flower clusters remain on the plant for months, starting out creamy white, aging to pinkish in mid-summer, and by autumn and winter are a dry, papery rusty-brown. Since the flower clusters don't fall apart when dry, they make very attractive features in floral arrangements. The stems and branches, with their exfoliating orange and cinnamon bark, also provide unique winter interest.

Most of the hydrangeas growing in Florida home landscapes are hybrids, and originally came from China and Japan, whereas the Oakleaf Hydrangea is one of the few hydrangeas native to the United States. A tremendous advantage is that it can thrive in much dryer locations than its cousins, which struggle in sandy soils. They thrive with very little attention and are very popular in North Florida gardens. "The Oakleaf Hydrangea has been a long-standing staple in the finest southern gardens. No collection of woodland flowering shrubs would be truly complete without them", says Renee Stambaugh, Florida native plant landscape designer.

**Description:** Oakleaf Hydrangea is a deciduous shrub with big leaves, long, sometimes drooping limbs, and an open, loosely branched mounded habit. It has multiple stems which form an upright rounded clump 6-10 ft. tall with an even greater spread. Oakleaf Hydrangea sends up shoots from underground stolons and often grows in colonies. The young stems are cloaked in felt-like coppery fuzz, and the larger stems have attractive cinnamon-tan-orange bark that shreds and peels in thin flakes. The leaves turn rich shades of red, bronze and purple in the fall, and often persist well into the winter. The flowers are borne in erect very showy cone-shaped clusters on the ends of branches. Unlike the exotic hydrangea, flower color does not vary with soil pH.

**Culture:** Oakleaf Hydrangea grows best in woody sites. **Light:** Oakleaf Hydrangea does well in partial to almost full shade. Avoid midday sun. **Moisture:** Oakleaf Hydrangea can survive droughts, however, for best performance, water during extended dry periods. **Propagation:** Divide clumps in winter or start green-wood tip cuttings in moist sand or potting medium in summer.

With the spring season is upon us, discover the beauty and benefits of Florida native hydrangeas





# Pick a Peck of Pickled Peppers

**Shirley Barber,  
Master Gardener Volunteer,  
UF/IFAS Extension SJC**

So...what the heck is a peck? According to Encyclopedia Britannica, a peck is a unit of measurement originating from the 14th century to measure flour. Today a peck is equal to 8 dry quarts. In comparison, a bushel equals 32 quarts.

Regardless of measurement, the All-America Selections® (AAS) display garden in the Botanical Gardens at St. Johns County Extension produced a heck of a lot of hot and spicy peppers. Drought and heat during the past few months were perfect conditions to grow healthy plants loaded with peppers of all shapes and colors. Current rains have taken the plants to new heights and production.

Given the love of the Datil pepper favored by locals, it's no wonder hot and spicy peppers are so popular. The AAS organization evaluates many pepper varieties each year with their top picks announced as AAS winners.

There were quite a few top performers in our AAS gardens worthy of consideration. This list is just a few of the hot and spicy peppers we grew and the years they were introduced: Mad Hatter (2017), Hot Sunset (2015), Mexican Sunrise (2018), Roulette (2018), Emerald Fire (2015), Flaming Flare (2015), Aji Rico (2017), Red Ember (2018), Chili Pie (2017). Visit the AAS website: <https://all-americaelections.org/winners/> for information on each variety. While you are on the website explore other award-winning vegetables and flowers. You are bound to find plants you will want for your garden. Seeds for these varieties can be found from a multitude of online sources. Peppers are so easy to grow from seed—germinating in just seven to ten days.

Check out our Pepper Patches in the Botanical Gardens at St. Johns County Extension Center. You will be amazed at how healthy and beautiful pepper plants can be.



Top row: Mad Hatter, Mexican Sunrise, Emerald Fire, Hot Sunset Bottom Row: Red Ember, Aji Rico, Flaming Flare, Chili Pie, Roulette