

Friday's Feature**By****Theresa Friday****January 4, 2009**

Launched a decade ago, the Florida Plants of the Year program celebrates plants ideal for Florida's unique growing conditions. Each year, a selection of Florida's best plants are hand-picked by a jury of distinguished horticulturists representing the different facets of the state's diverse nursery and landscape industry.

2009 brings an exciting year as the program marks its 10th anniversary. Following are a few of the best selections from the past decade of Florida Plants of the Year.

Pineapple guava, *Acca sellowiana*, is an evergreen shrub that can grow about 8 feet tall and 12 feet wide. It is a very cold hardy, salt-tolerant and disease resistant plant. Its spring flowers have pink and white waxy petals and dark red showy stamens and are edible with a slight pineapple flavor.

The perennial peanut, *Arachis glabrata*, is a native ground cover. It is a drought-tolerant, evergreen plant that is well suited for sunny areas and well-drained soils. It bears yellow flowers from late spring through fall. Since this plant can be mowed, it may be used as a replacement for turf.

Autumn fern, *Dryopteris erythrosora*, is a clumping fern with upright foliage reaching 24 inches in height and spread. It is best grown in light shade.

The firebush, known botanically as *Hamelia patens*, is a heat and sun loving plant. It is also known as the hummingbird bush and scarlet bush. Firebush is a densely branched perennial that will get about three to four feet tall in the Florida Panhandle. The pointed leaves are handsome with their pinkish veins and red petioles. It is a tender perennial along our Gulf Coast, freezing back in the winter and resprouting each spring.

Blooming begins in late summer when the plant explodes with terminal clusters of scarlet to orange colored flowers. The individual flowers are tubular and about one inch long. The small tubular flowers are a favorite of butterflies and hummingbirds and are regarded as a premier butterfly nectar plant. Flowers are followed by small, purplish berries that are eaten by a number of birds and other small animals.

The silver saw palmetto, *Serenoa repens*, is a silver form of our native clumping palm. It grows to be about 6 feet wide and tall. It is a cold-hardy, salt-tolerant palm that forms dense thickets in sandy coastal lands but is extremely slow-growing. Its common name is due to the leaf stalks bearing fine, sharp teeth or spines.

The winged elm, *Ulmus alata*, is a Florida native tree. It has a moderate growth rate and can reach 45 feet tall. Winged elm, also called corked elm, can be distinguished from other elms by the woody, wing-like growths along the branchlets. They are often irregular and may appear as warty growths or knots on one or both sides of the twigs.

This year's houseplant selection is known as the ZZ plant. *Zamioculcas zamiifolia* is an interesting succulent that has thick glossy leaflets on semi-erect fronds. ZZ's are extremely tough plants. They handle neglect extremely well, growing in low light conditions with little water.

**Pineapple guava****Perennial peanut****Autumn Fern****Firebush****Silver
saw palmetto****Winged
elm****ZZ**

Theresa Friday is the Environmental Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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