Friday’s Feature
By
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Cassia shrubs bring fall color to the landscape

While other shrubs and trees are getting ready for winter, the cassia shrubs are just now waking up.

There are two species of cassia shrubs that are so attractive that they can literally stop traffic during the fall. These shrubs were once staples in the landscape. Now, they are seen less frequent but are no less spectacular. For rich yellow color during the fall and winter, cassias are hard to beat.

Though there are over 500 species of cassia, there are two that are more commonly grown under northern Gulf Coast conditions. Cassia (Senna) alata, known locally as the candelabra or candlestick plant, grows to a height of about eight feet. It then produces erect flower spikes that resemble fat candles before the individual blossoms open.

The other cassia is known by several common names including butterfly cassia, Christmas cassia, winter cassia, climbing cassia, butterfly bush or just plain cassia. The common name “cassia” is derived from the genus Cassia, to which the species historically belonged. “Climbing” describes the plant’s clambering growth habit when support is available, while “shrub” refers to its growth habit in open ground. In the nursery trade it is known by the botanical name of Cassia or Senna bicapsularis.

To be scientifically accurate, the correct nomenclature for the Florida plant known as the butterfly cassia is Senna pendula.

Whatever we may call it, the butterfly cassia makes a large shrub or small tree reaching a maximum height of fifteen feet. It has an open, informal habit of growth and flowers in October. Individual blossoms resemble yellow butterflies, and occur all over the plant.
Some nurseries and garden centers offer container grown plants, especially during the fall while they are in bloom. Choose a planting site that receives full sunlight all day, if possible. The best growth and flowering occurs under high light conditions.

Most cassias, including the butterfly cassia and the candlestick cassia, are tropical or subtropical plants, so they are subject to freeze injury. They will come back year after year with some protection. To ensure they will return, plant them in an area that is protected from north winds.

The butterfly cassia is a bit weak wooded and may need periodic pruning to help reduce growth and keep the plants sturdy and compact. Reserve major pruning until late winter at which time cold damage can be removed and the plant can be thinned of lanky shoots and cut back to just a few feet high to resume growth. Keep in mind that cassias flower on the new growth, so constant pruning could limit flowering.

For those who want to start a butterfly garden but are unfamiliar with which plants are better attractors and easier to care for in our area, cassias are good starter plants. Not only are the yellow flowers attractive to several of the sulphur butterflies, the plants are host plants for the caterpillars of these butterflies.

For those unfamiliar with butterflies, the sulphur species’ range in color from whitish-green to bright yellow with orange markings and sizes from three-quarters of an inch to three inches across.

Because of *Senna pendula*’s ability to spread by seed, this plant may be considered invasive in South Florida. However, in North Florida there is no evidence that it spreads into natural areas and it is not considered a problem plant.

Theresa Friday is the Residential 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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