2004 Florida Plants of the Year

With warmer weather and a lot of trees and shrubs in flower, many people are anxious to work in their gardens. Spring is a time of renewal and for many gardeners this means adding some new plants to your landscapes. Fortunately, the Florida Nurserymen & Growers Association (FNGA) is here to help by making some “new plant” recommendations.

Since 1998, an FNGA committee, representing all aspects of horticulture in the state, chooses five to eight plants that are then recognized as the “Florida Plants of the Year.” The idea is to find plants that are available but are not used quite as often as they deserve to be.

The 2004 selections have been announced. Although some of the plants are better suited to South Florida, at least five will grow here in Northwest Florida. They are a diverse group of plants including annuals, perennials, shrubs and a palm. If you want to see all the selections, visit the FNGA website at http://www.fnga.org/news-programs/plantsofyear.asp. Here are the FNGA selections that will grow in our area.

**Needle Palm:** The Needle Palm (*Rhapidophyllum hystrix*) is a native, evergreen palm. It is low and bushy, reaching a maximum height of 8 feet, although it grows very slowly. This is a very hardy palm. It has survived temperatures below 0°F. This palm prefers partial to full shade but will tolerate sunny conditions. It is probably best suited to be an understory plant. This palm is not, however, salt tolerant.

The Needle Palm is a fan palm with large, rounded, deeply divided leaves. The leaf bases decay into long, needle-like fibers that stay on the plant giving it an interesting appearance. The trunks are covered with long, slender, sharp, erect spines or needles arising from the leaf bases. Even with its intimidating armor, this is an attractive palm.

**‘Shishigashira’ Camellia:** *Camellia sasanqua ‘Shishigashira’* flowers throughout fall and winter. Although this one has been around a while, its rose-red double to semi-double flowers makes this one to consider for your landscape. This evergreen shrub is compact with multiple trunks and can get 10 to 15 feet tall but can be maintained lower and fuller.

**Pelican Flower:** *Aristolochia grandiflora* is also known as Dutchman’s Pipe due to its unusual flower. This climbing vine is a strong grower and does require some type of
support. This vine is grown primarily for its very large, unusual, dark purple and white flowers. The flowers can easily be 10 inches across and emits an odd smell. The pungent odor is actually a mechanism to attract flies that are necessary to pollinate the flower. Not to worry however, the odor isn’t so strong that it will permeate your landscape.

In Northwest Florida, this is an unreliable perennial. This vine does freeze back. In some locations, it will regrow in spring. In other locations, this vine must be considered an annual and be replanted each year.

**Red Russelia:** *Russelia sarmentosa* is a fall flowering perennial in our area. Some people know this plant as the Dwarf Firecracker Plant or the Coral Plant. It can grow to be about 5 foot tall by 5 foot wide. It has long arching stems and can be used as a specimen plant or as part of a mixed border.

Its true distinguishing characteristic is its bright red tubular flowers. Butterflies are attracted to this plant.

**Lion’s Ear:** Lion’s ear has the scientific name of *Leonotus leonurus*. It is also known as lion’s beard, lion’s tail and wild dagga.

Lion’s ear is a shrubby perennial. It can get quite large; normally reaching heights of 4-5 feet with a 4-5 feet spread. This one does require some space in our flowerbeds. It is a member of the mint family, Lamiaceae. And, like most mints, it has opposite leaves with the young stems being distinctly square in cross section. The unique feature of this plant is, of course, its flowers.

Lion’s ear has many erect, straight stems which in the fall bears whorls of orange flowers. The flowers are also representative of the mint family. They are bilabiate (two-lipped), tubular flowers that are about 2 inches long in rounded clusters about four inches across. The flowers themselves are beautifully orange and somewhat hairy, and are said to resemble a lion’s ear, thus the name.

Lion’s ear does well in full sun, and once established, is fairly drought tolerant. It is hardy in zones 9-11. In our area, it will lose its leaves after a frost but does reliably come back in the spring. It is also fairly salt tolerant so it makes a good shrub for those coastal gardens.

Lion’s ear makes a great addition to a mixed bed or a butterfly garden. It is known to attract both butterflies and hummingbirds.

**‘Hurricane Louise’ Coleus:** *Solenostemon scutellarioides* ‘Hurricane Louise’ is an annual in Northwest Florida. Grown for its brightly colored foliage, this Coleus can be grown in full sun although it will require watering on those hot, summer afternoons. Foliage color is white, pink and green with frilled leaf edges. This Coleus has an upright growth habit and can get quite large, usually about 3 feet by 3 feet.
One problem with recommending plants is that sometimes that are not available in our nurseries. The Florida Plants of the Year are actually selected in advanced in order to allow the nurseries time to grow them. Trees are selected three years ahead and other plants are chosen a year in advance.

Many of the 2004 Florida Plants of the Year are on demonstration at the Milton Gardens located on the PJC/UF campus in Milton. Take a ride to the Gardens and take a look at these plants.