

Sundrops and Friends

by Rufino Osorio

Florida's Panhandle is home to one of our most attractive native wildflowers, *Oenothera fruticosa*, a plant with the delightful common name of sundrops. Widespread outside of Florida throughout the eastern United States, this is a plant which is found in moist, sunny areas. Early in the growing season it produces basal rosettes of leaves that are sometimes accented by random burgundy spots. As the season progresses, each rosette produces a stem approximately 12 to 18 inches (30 to 45 cm) tall. The tips of the stems are gracefully recurved, like a swan's neck, and carry abundant pointed flower buds. By late spring, the buds open into brilliant, golden yellow flowers. The color is difficult to capture on film, and there often appears to be just a hint of red in the flowers, adding a depth and intensity to the yellow color which is nearly unrivaled among our native wildflowers.

Plants grown far to the south or north of their native range sometimes present problems. Often, they may grow well but will not flower, or else they will flourish for a year or two and then collapse, seemingly pining away for their far-off home.

However, I am growing Sundrops far from the Panhandle in Palm Beach County without any difficulties. Although favoring moist prairies in nature, I am growing it under average garden conditions where it receives three to four hours of full sun. It unflinchingly grows right through our dry season even though the garden does not receive supplemental water. Large mature plants form impressive clumps and are magnificent in full bloom. Propagation is easily effected by dividing the plant with a sharp knife.

Sundrops is a carefree perennial and would make an attractive addition to any garden. In fact, in Chicago it is utilized in perennial garden beds right along with traditional non-native garden plants such as chrysanthemums, delphiniums, irises, and peonies. It is also used as a flowering groundcover, and I have seen huge beds many square yards in extent planted solely with sundrops. These



Oenothera fruticosa



Oenothera speciosa

From *Flowers of the South* by Greene & Blomquist

beds become spectacular sheets of molten gold when the plants are in bloom.

Two relatives of sundrops that grow in Florida have potential as garden plants, although both have spreading tendencies and must be planted with care so that they will not overrun the garden. *Oenothera humifusa*, seaside evening-primrose, grows naturally along Florida's coast where it thrives under harsh conditions including relentless winds, scorching sun, and irregular rainfall. The foliage of this plant is attractively clothed with silvery hairs and it makes an interesting groundcover for a dry sunny spot. But be warned! If happy, seedlings will pop up everywhere. The small flowers are pale yellow and, true to their name, open in the evening and are withered by late morning.

Oenothera speciosa, showy primrose, is native to the Great Plains; but it is becoming established throughout many parts of the United States, including Florida. Showy primrose is indeed attractive and lives up to its common name. The large flowers vary from pure white to deep pink,

and the sprawling, ground-covering plants become a solid blanket of color when in full bloom.

Although not invasive under natural conditions where competition from other plants and the vagaries of climate keep it in check, this plant is extremely aggressive in gardens. It spreads through underground stems (rhizomes) and a single plant can cover a surprisingly large area. Also, self-sown seedlings become readily established in garden settings.

Because showy primrose is so attractive, and because it looks "native" when growing along roadsides, it can easily find its way into wildflower gardens. This is all the more likely since it is perfectly suited for xeric landscape gardens and for dry, exposed sites where other plants are difficult to establish. However, please realize that it is not originally native to Florida and should not be grown in public wildflower gardens, nor should it be planted in sites that are in close proximity to natural areas and into which showy primrose might spread. The latter precaution is to be taken, not because showy primrose might prove aggressively invasive, but because natural areas are now so rare that every effort should be taken to maintain them in a pristine state. Fortunately, experience with other plants introduced into Florida from the western states (such as *Gaillardia pulchella* and *Phlox drummondii*) has shown that such plants, while sometimes becoming common, do not become ecologically disruptive weeds.

Two of the three plants discussed here have common names that include the word "primrose"; however, they are not botanically related to the true primroses in the genus *Primula*. Yellow-flowered species of *Oenothera* vaguely reminded Europeans of the yellow-flowered primrose of Europe, *Primula veris*. The name stuck, and now even species of *Oenothera* that lack yellow flowers carry the word primrose in their common names.

Rufino Osorio is enthusiastic about neglected native plants that have definite horticultural potential and are easy to grow throughout a wide range of Florida.