THE RED HIBISCUS (Hibiscus coccineus)

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Red Hibiscus  
Hibiscus coccineus Walt.  
by Peggy Lantz, with help from Sam Hopkins

While canoeing one late-summer day on the Oklawaha River and the Silver River (Silver Springs run), I saw the crimson blossoms of what I found out was red, or swamp, hibiscus, Hibiscus coccineus. The beauty of those large brilliant flowers along the lush, green banks of the crystal-clear river remains pleasurably in my memory.

This native hibiscus is a common resident of the marshes and swamps of the northern part of Florida, although it is not well known. It also occurs in the southern parts of Georgia and Alabama during the summer, and does not occur naturally to any great extent south of Orlando, though there is a population in Corkscrew Swamp.

It grows in swamps, marshes, sloughs, and ditches, commonly in water. Sam has seen it growing near the St. Johns River at Tosahatchee State Reserve, and I have seen it bloom on the St. Johns at Blue Spring.

The red hibiscus is a herbaceous perennial having crimson to deep red flowers, 5" to 8" across. Petals and leaves are smooth throughout, and it has several stems from a robust, thickened base, growing one to two, and sometimes three, meters tall (three to ten feet). Flowers are solitary in the axils of the upper leaves and the flower stalks are long. Petals are deep red, wedge-shaped, and are often obliquely tapered, 7 to 10 cm long (3 to 4 inches).

The leaves are palmate, with deep clefts divided into five segments up to 25 cm long. The margins of the leaflets are often bluntly toothed. They closely resemble the leaves of the marijuana plant (but the flowers of marijuana are green and inconspicuous).

Brightman Logan has used the red hibiscus in landscaping projects in the Tampa area, and has planted it in the water near his own home. The police stopped by one day to check it out, but Brightman convinced them that the bright red flower was not marijuana.

Nancy Bissett has it for sale at the Bissett's nursery, The Natives, and they have used it successfully in landscaping as far south as the Lake Wales area. They, too, have had police suspicious of their plantings. If you decide to live dangerously and include it in your waterfront landscaping, be prepared, and hope that it is blooming when the sheriff's department cruises by!

The cover photo of the red hibiscus was taken by Mary Ellen Smith of Melbourne in August in Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary.

Euthanasia", the letter was in response to an editorial advocating the replacement of lawns with gardens. Mr. Morrison went further and recommended that people "... replace all or portions of lawns with ground covers and shrubs native to this area. Once they are established, such plantings will require very little water because they are natives that nature has adapted to survive here with little, if any, need for fertilizers, pesticides, and supplemental watering."

Mr. Morrison continued by suggesting gradual replacement of ailing turf with native plants. He then recommended FNPS as "a fine source of information", citing our quarterly journal and regional chapters, and the availability of a list of nurseries.

The response was immediate and is continuing. Over 90 pieces of mail were received within a few days, including 50 in one day, and about 150 responses have been received so far.

The nature of the mail varies from only an SASE with no note, to just a copy of the article (fortunate, as these told us what was happening!), to requests for the AFNN directory or information about FNPS, to letters like the one which began "As I sit here looking out at my parched lawn... .".

Most of the requests reflected severe disenchantment with maintaining a traditional lawn in the face of water shortages, with the hottest part of the year still ahead. More than a few expressed pleasure in discovering that FNPS exists, including in some cases the assumption that it must be a new organization, as they had never heard of it before.

The conclusion to be drawn from this is that there is a vast untapped reservoir of potential native plant enthusiasts out there, needing only to be given our message, or even just to be told that FNPS exists, to enlist their support of native plants. It does not matter so much whether they actually join FNPS (although we have sent all respondents a packet of information); what really matters is that they become aware of the value of native plants. With water shortages becoming more widespread throughout peninsular Florida, Xeriscape concepts and their importance need to be more frequently pronounced to what is obviously a receptive audience.

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