

SOUTH FLORIDA WILDFLOWERS

Candidates for Cultivation

by Chuck McCartney

A lifelong Floridian, Chuck McCartney is a newspaperman and a specialist in Florida's orchids. He says, "My grandmother came to Homestead in 1918, my mother was born there, and I was raised there as well. Many of the wildflowers I use to illustrate my program and now know botanically I first knew as a child when I roamed the pinewoods and fields around my family home. I used to pick bouquets of these pretty wildflowers and take them to my mother. Now I 'pick' them with my camera and share their beauty with as many others as I can."

Every garden flower was once a wildflower somewhere. Someone fascinated by the beauty of the blooms took the plant in hand and grew it. Later, through careful clone selection and hybridization, the plant's flower size, flower pattern, color, or growth habit were "improved" to incorporate desirable characteristics, breed out negative traits, or extend the variety of plant form.

While the Northerners, Midwesterners and Southerners who populate South Florida bemoan the loss of their beloved lilacs, tulips, hyacinths, daffodils, peonies, camellias or rhododendrons, they all but overlook the wealth of beautiful natural plant material available in the subtropical southern tip of the peninsula.

In recent years, some progress has been made in raising public awareness of native trees such as paradise tree, pigeon plum, satinleaf, et al, and native shrubs such as wax myrtle or the various stoppers. However, gardeners still tend to by-pass the herbaceous wildflowers.

Some few of our wildflowers have made it into cultivation. Butterfly weed, *Asclepias*

tuberosa; blazing star, *Liatris* spp.; and black-eyed susans, *Rudbeckia hirta*, are offered in seed catalogues on a limited basis. Some nurseries specializing in aquatic plants offer such native species as pickerel weed, *Pontedaria cordata*; arrow-leaf, *Sagittaria* spp.; and waterlilies, including *Nymphaea odorata*.

Some of our native tropical epiphytes, including such bromeliads as *Tillandsia fasciculata* and such orchids as the cow-horn orchid, *Cyrtopodium punctatum*, have found favor with home growers. The almost endemic onion orchid, *Encyclia tampensis*, is often grown and frequently used in orchid hybridization.

But other than these few examples, it's difficult to find South Florida wildflower species in cultivation. This is curious. It makes me wonder why nobody has done selective breeding with the weedy spanish needles, *Bidens alba*, to develop a beautiful hot-weather alternative to the shasta daisy. I wonder why butterweed, *Senecio glabellus*, and flat-topped goldenrod, *Flaveria linerais*, aren't being utilized as the gorgeous annual bedding plants they could be. And why aren't we growing our handsome native *Iris hexagona* var. *savannarum*, which turns the mucky depths of the Big Cypress Swamp into places of beauty each spring?

Listed below are a few of South Florida's beautiful and unusual native wildflowers which I feel have potential as cultivated plants. I am not a gardener nor am I a geneticist, so I cannot state with certainty that selective breeding will improve or overcome negative characteristics of each species so they can become useful additions to the cultivated landscape. However, as a traveler and observer in South Florida's dwindling natural habitats, I can point the way to beautiful species which I feel have potential. It's up to someone more skilled in horticulture to prove their worth.

(The **Wildflower List** is available from FNPS, 1203 Orange Ave., Winter Park 32789, for \$1.00 and SASE.)