

Summer Color Shrubs for the Sun

05-28-2020

The summer sun and heat can drive gardeners into a reduced outdoor schedule but there is a selection of sub-tropical shrubs that prosper in the San Antonio weather and return each summer. Plant them in June. The list includes esperanza, poinciana, thyralis, duranta, and firebush.

The most desirable selection of esperanza, "Gold Star" has yellow tubular blooms that are produced on a plant that often starts blooming at 3 feet tall and will bloom all summer as it eventually grows to 7 feet tall. One of the proofs that you have "Gold Star" is that it begins blooming at a small size at the nursery. Look for the name and the blooms. The old-fashioned esperanza selections have smaller flowers and usually only bloom at the top of the tall plant at the end of the summer.

Esperanza foliage is a Kelly-green color and provides a lush background for the tubular flowers. Hummingbirds and butterflies are attracted to the blooms for nectar and in most neighborhoods the deer do not eat esperanza.

Poinciana is also called "Pride of Barbados". It grows to 7 feet tall after freezing back to the roots in the winter. The foliage is compound leaflets on horizontal stems arranged in an airy pattern. The glow-in-the-dark orange and yellow blooms produced above the foliage are very showy. Poinciana is as drought tolerant as esperanza and in fact they are often planted together in full sun arrangements in the middle of parking lots. Deer in my neighborhood do not eat poinciana but they may eat the blooms in some neighborhoods. Butterflies are attracted to the flat clusters of bloom for nectar.

The most deer-proof of the list of plants described in this article is thyralis. In most situations it grows back to 6 or 7 feet tall after freezing back in the winter. It has small yellow blooms that open along the stems at the top of the plant. The blooms are not as showy as esperanza, but they are equally drought tolerant and are sought after by pollinators as a nectar source.

Duranta has purple or white clusters of blooms that hang on the ends of the arching stems. Backed up by the light green foliage they are extremely attractive. Duranta is less upright than the other hot weather full sun bloomers and produces a larger spreading plant in most planting situations. In my neighborhood duranta are eaten by the deer but it is worth it to find them a growing site in full sun because they often are covered by Queen, Gulf Fritillary, and Monarch butterflies in the fall.

Firebush is also eaten by deer in some situations but again, find it a spot in full sun where you can enjoy its reddish foliage and small tubular, red flowers. If you grow it in the shrub border or as a specimen plant in the landscape, after a slow start in the spring, it will grow to at least 6 feet tall and 5 feet around.

I like firebush best, however, as a container plant. Grown in a 10-gallon container it makes a compact plant 3 feet tall and 3 feet in diameter. Placed on the patio it will be the favorite nectar source of the fall migrating ruby-throated, black-chinned, and rufous hummingbirds. In addition to the competitive hummingbirds, you will experience the conversion of the foliage to maroon with the arrival of cold weather. Grown in a container with its limited soil reservoir and fibrous root system, firebush requires more irrigation attention than it does growing in the landscape.