

# Taming the Wild Morning Glories

by Frederick B. Essig

When I wrote about morning glories in this magazine's Oct/Nov 08 issue, I focused on species that are well established as garden plants. As glorious as they are, many of the standard cultivated morning glories grow only reluctantly in Florida. Some will flourish only during cool spring weather, maybe continuing through the summer if pampered with rich soil and water. Few will come back year after year on their own. So growing them means replanting each year and catering to their every wish.

But did you know there are 25 species of morning glory that grow wild in Florida? They



*Littlebells are lovely up close, but don't put on a very big show.*



*Yellow-colored morning glories are found in the tropical American genus Merremia.*

obviously are adapted to thrive in our climate, and to propagate themselves from year to year without any help from us! Why not grow some of them in our gardens?

I must clarify that "wild" does not necessarily mean "native." Of the 25 species listed in the *Guide to the Vascular Plants of Florida* as occurring on their own in Florida, only 12 are native and 13 are naturalized escapees from cultivation or weeds that were brought in accidentally. Native species are sometimes rare and endangered and must be treated respectfully so as not to damage natural populations. Special permits may be required even to collect seeds of some of them. On the other hand, weedy introduced species may have already made a nuisance of themselves, and further spread is prohibited or





*Ipomoea hederifolia* is a bright red Florida native.

discouraged. In addition, species that have not been domesticated through years of breeding may be difficult to propagate, may need very specialized soil conditions or may not flower as prolifically as the well-bred garden standards.

One of our native species is already quite popular: the moonvine, *Ipomoea alba*. It is available from major seed companies, so anyone can grow it with a clear conscience. On the other hand, one commonly-cultivated species, *I. purpurea*, the "tall morning glory," is not native and has "gone wild" in a few places in Florida. Fortunately it appears to be not too invasive. It has reseeded and come up in my back yard for several years, bearing an abundance of dark purple flowers throughout the summer and early fall. It is

possibly the species that is easiest to grow in our state, and that will provide the most "bang for the buck."

Another exotic that has naturalized here without becoming too much of a nuisance is *I. triloba*, known as "littlebell." I found some growing in the hedge behind my dentist's office in north Tampa and brought some seeds home. The nicked seeds germinated readily, and the well-behaved vines have been growing on my fence for a couple of years now. The flowers of this tropical American native are smallish, pink and bell-shaped. They are delightful up close, but do

not create a very conspicuous display. With some old-fashioned selective breeding, however, they may be induced to

put on more of a show.

Another native is *I. pandurata*, commonly called "man of the earth." It has large, whitish flowers with deep pink to purple throats. Although widespread in Florida, it is not particularly common or conspicuous. I was delighted to find a patch beside the road in a vacant lot within walking distance of my home in Lutz, and brought some seeds home. It has not been a strong grower, with rather weak stems that trail along the ground as much as they climb over bushes. I had to tie it here and there to get it to grow up a chain-link fence. The interesting thing about this species is that it is a perennial with tuberous roots. Once established, it should come back year after year, and with proper watering and nutrition may become more robust over time.

One species that certainly should not be grown is the



Native *Ipomoea pandurata* produces large flowers in abundance in late summer.



“mile-a-minute vine,” *I. cairica*. This African import spreads aggressively across the ground, rooting at nodes as it goes. It will grow vigorously on a fence, but blooms only sporadically. It has interesting, palmately compound leaves and large lilac flowers, but overall has more negatives than pluses. Perhaps some of its interesting features could be incorporated through hybridization into other less-aggressive species.

Another native species, *I. cordatotriloba*, is grown occasionally as a landscape ornamental, and seeds can sometimes be found for sale on the Internet. I’ve seen it along roads in Hillsborough County. It puts on a very nice display of large, lavender-pink flowers, usually in late summer or fall, and has interesting 3-lobed leaves. Its free-flowering habit and large flower size make it one of the most promising of our natives.

Two native species, *I. indica* and *I. hederacea*, have sky-blue flowers like the popular *I. tricolor* ‘Heavenly Blue’ from tropical America. Found in scattered locations across the state, they may contribute to the future of Florida’s cultivated morning glory varieties.

A native that brings brilliant, true scarlet to the morning glory palette is *I. hederifolia*. It is similar to cypress vine, *I. quamoclit*, but with broad, heart-shaped



*Ipomoea purpurata* persists on its own in Florida.



*Ipomoea cordatotriloba* is a late-summer show off.

or 3-lobed leaves instead of fine, fern-like leaves. By comparison, the weak reddish color of the cultivated ‘Scarlet O’ Hara’ is quite disappointing.

Yellows are rare in *Ipomoea*. None are found in our Florida species, although yellow-flowered *I. ochracea* comes from South Africa. Brilliant yellow, morning-glory-shaped flowers can be found in a related genus, *Merremia*. Two species with bright yellow flowers, *M. umbellata* and *M. tuberosa*, have been introduced from tropical America into southern Florida.

Check with your local extension office or native plant society for guidance on what can be legally collected. It is safest to obtain native plants from reputable native plant nurseries ([www.afnn.org](http://www.afnn.org)), or through your local native plant society.

An Associate Professor of Biology at USF in Tampa, Dr. Essig wrote “Iris Family Gems from South Africa” in our Feb/Mar 2011 issue.

## Newly Published

### A Guide to the Vascular Plants of Florida,

Third Edition

by Wunderlin and Hansen, \$44.95

University Press of Florida (800)226-3822

[www.upf.com](http://www.upf.com)