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October 2014 Newsletter

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Easy Perennials for Fall Color



The most common wildflower showing off along our roadsides at this time of year is the Narrowleaf or [Swamp Sunflower](#). 2-3" wide, brilliant sunny yellow, brown-eyed daisies are born in loose clusters atop the fairly sturdy stems of this clump forming perennial. In the garden it can reach 8' and 4-6' wide once well established and towers above the surrounding perennials. Nearly every spring ours get nibbled back to about 2' high by passing deer who unknowingly pinch it back for us making for fuller and denser plants. Keep pruning to a minimum after July/August for the best fall flower show. With a broad tolerance of soil conditions from dryer sandy roadsides to consistently moist clay soils this easy native perennial is sure to steal the show in the fall flower garden, meadow, and of course in roadside plantings. Once the flowers have finished, the heads will ripen tiny sunflower seeds just in time for migrating songbirds to feast upon. Unlike many sunflowers this one is a definite clump forming perennial and seems to stay where you put it though it can reseed. The flowers attract a variety of pollinators including bees and butterflies.

There are a host of other Asters that wait until fall to begin their crescendo of color but the [Aromatic Aster](#) is one to steal the show. It covers up in 1" blue to purple, yellow centered daisies and the show lasts for weeks.

The plant

itself has a naturally mounding and spreading, clump forming to somewhat rhizomatous habit to about 2' high by 3-4' wide once well-established. Like most other members of the Sunflower family, or Asteraceae, the flowers are adored by smaller pollinators. Aromatic Aster is a component of the Kansas and Oklahoma prairies, has a wide distribution across much of the central US, and is tolerant of a wide range of soil conditions so long as it has good drainage. Provide full sun for the fullest and showiest plants. We grow the cultivar 'October Skies' that has a more compact habit than the species and bluish purple daisies.





The Salvias and Sages are all abloom just in time for migrating hummingbirds but few can compete with the show that [Mexican Sage](#) puts on in fall. From long spikes of velvety calyces emerge the 1" long tubular flowers that are generally either purple or white. The showy velvety calyces can also be either white or purple and may be confused for flowers themselves. A tough clump forming perennial, Mexican Sage is a great performer and requires very minimal maintenance; just provide a well-draining soil and ample sunlight and the show will just get better with each passing year. In mild winter areas it can flower in spring as well as fall. If a 3-4' high by 3-4' wide clump is just too massive consider the shorter and more compact selection called 'Santa Barbara'. Mexican Sage comes in purple or 'Midnight', white, and if you're indecisive or just want the best of both worlds consider the 'Bicolor' form with purple calyces and white flowers.

Another Texas tough Sage that really puts on a fall show is the appropriately named [Autumn Sage](#). It produces a profusion of 1" long, two-lipped tubular flowers in colors that range from the deepest reds, through pinks, near orange, yellow, white, and even purple and the hummingbirds just can't seem to pass up. This is a drought and pest resistant shrub-like perennial with a naturally low and rounded habit to about 2' high by 2' wide. This Texas native is tolerant of a wide range of soil types so long as they have excellent drainage. Flowering is not limited to fall and many of the newer selections and hybrids can flower from late spring through fall.



How about a perennial Hibiscus for fall color? Few perennial Hibiscus are as well-known in the South as the Confederate Rose. Although it is a native of China, it has been grown for so long in our area as to have earned its common name. With big billowy double flowers, although there are single flowered forms, that open white or pink all atop a large growing, sometimes tree-like, root hardy perennial to small tree/large shrub. The Confederate Rose requires minimal care once established in the landscape and has few pest or disease problems when provided with ample sunlight and a well-drained soil. The Double Pink flowered form opens pink and remains pink with the curled spent flowers darkening to near red. The Double White form opens white in the morning but on a sunny day almost all of the flowers will be pink by evening. In the northern portions of its range the Confederate Rose is a root hardy perennial that freezes to the ground in winter and readily returns in spring providing an excellent fall show. In milder winter regions where the stems can remain over winter it may flower in late spring as well as in fall. It grows to 15' high and 15' wide in a single season here in zone 8B and may reach 20' or more in milder regions.

Introducing Almost Eden's Baby Pink Perennial Hibiscus

If the Confederate Roses are too large for your landscape then you may want to consider these two free flowering hybrids: the [Single Red Confederate Rose](#) and our newest introduction [Almost Eden's Baby Pink Perennial Hibiscus](#). These too are root hardy and look so similar to the true single flowered Confederate Roses, *Hibiscus mutabilis*, that only a botanist might know the difference but much of their similarity stops there. Both of these perennial Hibiscus produce large, 6"+ wide single flowers in deep reddish pink or a lighter medium pink. Oh, and did I mention they flower from



summer to frost atop much more compact plants that generally top out at about 8' for us. Truly if we could only have one perennial Hibiscus in our garden it would definitely be one of these two! Spring planting is best for young plants in the northern portions of its hardiness range.



The [Texas Craglily](#) is a rare south Texas perennial that produces 3-5' high spikes of loosely clustered, 1" wide yellow flowers over an extended period in late summer and into fall that emerge from clumps of medium green, daylily-like foliage. A bulbous perennial, the Texas Craglily, *Echeandia texensis*, seems to have few if any pest or disease problems in the garden provided it has good drainage and at least half of a day of sunlight.

Not exactly a fall *flower* show but how about a brilliant red-orange color show in late summer, fall, and even through winter? The [Mamou Bean](#), otherwise known as the Coral Bean or Red Cardinal in areas outside of Louisiana, follows its show of deep red, 2-3" long tubular, spring and summer flowers with long swollen pods that curl and blacken as they ripen, waiting until late summer to split open and display their bright and shiny, deep orange-red beans. Cut the ripened stems to make an easy arrangement addition, or better yet leave them to brighten up the fall garden, but remember that the seeds and other plant parts are considered highly poisonous to humans and animals. Although we cannot recommend it, the seeds, roots, and bark of this plant have been used in medicine by Native Americans and for a variety of ailments as well as the extract from roots and seeds being used in cough medicines in southern



Louisiana and other portions of its range.



The Mamou Bean naturally wants to be a small tropical tree or large shrub but it is seemingly perfectly adapted to growing in the colder more northerly portions of its range where it can live to be countless decades old. It basically develops a swollen, underground tuber-like stem or more accurately a caudex as well as a large fleshy root system. In other words it has learned to grow its trunk nearly underground much like our native cold hardy palm the Palmetto. Tough is an understatement once this plant is established and it shrugs off some of the worst growing conditions from the seasonally wet, clay soils of the Cajun Prairie, to salty coastal sands, and locally we find it in the drier uplands of the Longleaf Pines. Here in zone 8B it is a die-back perennial, freezing to the ground each winter and returning each spring. About the only maintenance it requires is to carefully remove (it does have thorns) any dead stems and flower spikes each winter or early spring and be sure that younger plants are protected by a mulch. You may even want to consider providing additional protection when the plants are very young if temperatures are going to remain below 28°F for significant periods.

Here are a few more perennials that are still showing off in the fall garden: Turks Caps and Sleepy Mallows, Lantana, Purple Showers Ruellia or Mexican Petunia, and the Early Start Violet and Robert Poore Garden or Fall Phlox. Don't overlook our native grasses when looking for fall and winter color. Many of our perennial native grasses are at their best this time of year producing tall, airy, and billowy seed and flower clusters that sway with each passing breeze. Over fall and winter the blues, greens, reds, yellows, oranges, and even purples gradually change to the color of straw but their form may last into spring. Except for Muhly Grass which doesn't like its foliage to be cut back hard most other native grasses can be cut back nearly to the ground just before new growth begins in spring.

Getting Root Hardy Tropical and Subtropical Plants Through Winter



So if young Mamou plants require a little extra care in their first few winters how do they get established here naturally you might ask? Our winter low temperatures can vary quite a bit from year to year, it's also about how long it stays that cold. If your soils freeze over winter, this probably isn't the garden plant for you. We commonly see 15°F but it is usually for short periods, rarely but occasionally we do see winters in the single digits, and even less rarely do we stay at those temperatures for any length of time. And just as commonly we might have a series of mild winters. Not so many years ago it seemed like it never dropped below 25°F and was above 32°F for most of that winter, and this is when I would imagine that the Mamou is best able to establish itself in the wild. Mother Nature often naturally provides a protective winter mulch of leaf litter as it does here in the Pineywoods along with the evergreen needles of the pines providing overhead shelter from most frosts as well.

Fall is the perfect time to plant root hardy perennials as well as cold hardy trees, shrubs, and vines but not so much for tropical plants. *"So when is the best time to plant tropical plants?"* you might ask and in many ways the Mamou plant has the perfect answer. Not only has it learned to mulch itself by growing partially underground it also has a hard seed coat that requires much of winter, and maybe more than one, before it becomes permeable to water at which point the seed germinates. My personal rule of thumb is if you're not 100% sure about a plant's hardiness, and if it is a tropical it is difficult to be 100% sure, then grow it as a container plant until it is well-established and has enough energy left in its root mass that if it does freeze back so that it will be able to regrow and hopefully flower the following season. In general, like the Mamou, we like to plant root hardy tropical and subtropical plants in spring to give them all summer and fall to establish a generous root system.

Consider the areas that you have to choose from and provide your more tender plants with a sheltered winter position whenever possible. Planting on the south or east side of a house or other protective structure can often help improve your chances for success and may gain you as much as half of a hardiness zone with the right microclimate. Choose plants that are known to be root hardy in your area. I know that here in our 8B garden where temperatures can drop to 15°F on a regular basis that zone 10 plants are generally off limits for the garden are not likely to survive much more than the lightest of freezes and many will not even tolerate a frost. Sometimes we can get away with planting hardier zone 9 plants if we provide them with an ample mulch and a protected location.





The first thing that we look to when determining what we can and cannot grow in our garden are the USDA Cold Hardiness zones that our potential new plant will grow in. We live and garden in zone 8B and so optimally we look for plants that are hardy in at least zones 7-9. If the growers say that it is hardy in zone 8-10 we know that more research is needed as it may need a mulch or protected area to do well. There are always exceptions to the rules and [Sambac Jasmine](#) is a good example. Dave's Garden says that it is only hardy to zone 11 (winter temperatures above 40°F) and the American Horticulture Society's **A-Z Encyclopedia of Garden Plants** says zones 10-11 but I have heard of plants returning reliably each year as far north as Shreveport, Louisiana where temperatures can get down to 10°F! With that said, the ever popular 'Grand Duke of Tuscany' is so slow growing that I doubt that it would get a chance to flower even if it did come back but the more vigorous cultivars might be worth a try outside of their normal range. Another interesting example is the Mexican Love or [Mexican Flame Vine](#), *Senecio confusus*, rated as zone 9,10 by Dave's Garden and warmer than that by the **AHS Encyclopedia of Garden Plants**. The orange flowered form is not reliably hardy in our zone 8B garden but interestingly the redder colored cultivar 'Sao Paulo' has been in our garden for over 5 years now in a well-drained, protected position with a pine straw mulch. We have to take a moment to thank the late and wonderful teacher, artist, and gardener, as well as a Beauregard Parish Master Gardener, Ms. Ebelene Kelly for sharing this plant and that knowledge with us. To give questionably cold hardy tropical and subtropical plants the best chance consider waiting until spring, once the ground has warmed sufficiently and generally well past any danger of frost, late April and May for us in some years.

Avoiding fertilizing all plants late in the season will also help them to begin to acclimate to the coming cooler temperatures. Woodier stems are generally more cold hardy than green or fleshy stemmed herbaceous stems. Deciduous broadleaved plants are generally more cold hardy than their broadleaved, evergreen cousins. The leaves of a deciduous tree may return much of its energy rich sugar molecules to the tree before falling. This generalization may be due, at least to some extent, to the higher concentration of sugars in the sap which tends to help increase cold hardiness the same as antifreeze does in our vehicle's coolant systems. The reduced growth rate as well as the higher concentration of sugars help to prevent the moisture in the cells from freezing and thus rupturing and leaking out all of the cell's contents which we see as freeze damage. If the root crown of a cold sensitive species freezes this can mean a sure death for many tropical plants. Often enough a generous breathable mulch can help to prevent that as it traps the heat from the ground and helps to hold it around that crown.

Here is another example but in the generally more tropical *Clerodendrum* species: Three years ago we purposely planted five each of two species of the very similar red flowered species: [Japanese Glory Bower](#), *Clerodendrum japonicum* and the [Pagoda Flower](#), *Clerodendrum paniculatum*. Both of these plants have similarly sized, nearly heart shaped, large, rich green tropical looking leaves and grow from a singular stem



that is eventually topped by large flower clusters. The flowers of both species are in the red tones and are produced in 12-16" high and wide red panicles tipped in clusters of reddish flowers that somewhat resemble butterflies in form. We've known from experience that the Japanese Glory Bower would return. For years we've admired it on the North side of two houses in DeRidder, even after the winters of 1983 and 1986. Japanese Glory Bower is the darker red of the two, has the largest flowers, and is the more vigorous growing of the two. The Pagoda Flower has a slightly smaller habit as a perennial and produces coral pink flowers that may be only slightly more in number than those of the Japanese Glory Bower. Both plants are adored by butterflies and hummingbirds when in flower. It is now fall, and the effects of the previous hard winter have taken its toll on the Pagoda Flower, and so all 4 of the living original 5 plants are only about 2' high and have as of yet no flowers. The Japanese Glory Bowers have grown and flowered for much of summer and have multiplied well (These are not aggressive colonizers like Cashmere Bouquet). As you can see plant selection, planting times, and site selection are key to successfully growing many plants outside of their normal cold hardiness ranges.

Order Now for Spring Shipping at Sale Prices

Our huge 2014 Summer Sale has carried over into fall and we are still offering a broad selection of popular plants at reduced prices as we prepare for winter. We would like to offer you the chance take advantage of our sale and if you like we can hold your order until you are ready for them in the spring. This way we worry about winter's cold and you still get your plants at great prices. Just put your preferred shipping week in the comments section when you place your order and we'll hold your plants and get them to you when it is the best time for you and your plants.

Thank You & Good Growing,
John, Bonnie, & Jeff McMillian
And the Crew at Almost Eden