

Bell County Master Gardeners

Tip of the Week

By Candy Mullen

"Plant Patriotic!"

Since it is close to our Nation's Birthday, July 4th, I thought about a red, white, and blue garden to honor our nation and our troops! I started researching and came up with some selections I think all of you will like and are easy to grow here in Central Texas.

The red color of the palate' even goes along with the patriotic celebration theme! It is the firecracker plant (*Russelia equisetiformis*), which started as an indoor plant but has migrated to the outdoors as a tender annual. You could try to overwinter it with protection here. Firecracker plants form a bushy shrub up to 1 foot high with an equal or greater spread. Its compact mounding form is heavily covered with tiny, red flowers that appear at all the leaf axils. Its slender, tubular flowers of bright red have a contrasting black band at the tip. Leaves are long and narrow. The firecracker plant is an unusual flowering plant whose flowers look like fireworks bursting from the foliage. It got its name from the way the blooms seem to blast up and out in all directions from the base plant! It is a native of Mexico.

Grow the firecracker plant in full sun in average but well-drained soil. Use them as edging plants for borders or in rock gardens. It is also a good container plant, with growth flowing over the edges of hanging baskets, window boxes, or other planters. Branches can be cut and used in flower arrangements. Firecracker also makes good ground cover as it blooms from late spring to early fall! The plants are also butterfly and hummingbird magnets. It has won the title of the best Fourth of July Flower and loves the hot sun of Texas!

To add the white to the palate', consider the sweet autumn clematis (*Clematis paniculata*). I personally love this vine. It is covered with incredible numbers of small, highly fragrant, white, star-shaped flowers, like the stars in our flag, and it has a lovely scent. The hummingbirds and butterflies love sweet autumn and it continues to bloom through the summer into the late fall. It offers valuable late season nectar for bees, butterflies and other pollinators. Zone hardiness is 4-9 and it prefers full sun to partial shade. Growth rate is rapid and although it can reach 30' in height, it is easily pruned and trained in a variety of styles. Flowers are borne on new wood, so an early spring pruning will control size. It will form a white fleece-like blanket that drapes beautifully over large rocks, chain-link fences, arbors, or pergolas.

Now let's add the blue to the garden! One great selection is the *Plumbago auriculata* (Cape Leadwort, Blue/Cape Plumbago, Skyflower). If you love blue flowers and butterflies, this is an easy-to-care for, true blue plant and a must to have. It is a vigorous grower and a nonstop profuse bloomer. It likes full sun to semi-shade and flowers best in full sun. It is reasonably drought tolerant and doesn't like wet feet, so don't overwater! . If you're a nature lover, try mass planting *Plumbago* in your garden to attract birds and butterflies. It is also the larval host plant and nectar source for several kinds of butterflies. There is also a white blooming variety; both respond well to pruning and bear their flowers on new wood. Try these plants together in your flowerbed for a patriotic display as a showstopper with butterflies galore! You won't be sorry.

Have any questions about gardening in Central Texas? Contact ask.bcmga@gmail.com Bell County master gardeners are taking applications for the next class starting January 2013. Applications can be downloaded from the website or picked up at the AgriLife Extension Office, 1605 North Main, Belton, Texas. [254-933-5305](tel:254-933-5305). The all-inclusive fee is \$250.