



Skullcap: Strange name, neat plant

Gardeners' Dirt by Charlie Neumeyer June 16, 2023



This Texas pink skullcap was planted as a low-growing, colorful border showing the colorful impact of the skullcap plant.

Contributed photo by Somervell County Master Gardener Association.



This Wright's skullcap specimen had been in the ground for about a year when this photo was taken. It overwintered well and started blooming in early March.

Contributed photo by Charlie Neumeyer

All the rain we've had lately has put thoughts of water conservation on the back burners of our minds. But, being Texans, we know that as far as our weather goes, it is either feast or famine. A family of plants that can thrive in the dry heat and tolerate infrequent bouts of heavy rain is the Scutellaria family.

Scutellaria is a genus of flowering plants in the mint family. Accord to Wikipedia, the name is derived from the Latin "scutella, meaning a small dish, tray or platter." The common name, skullcap, alludes to the resemblance of the shape of the plant's calyx to "miniature medieval helmets."

There are an estimated 350 species of the Scutellaria, but the three most common species that can be found locally are "Texas pink skullcap," "Wright's skullcap" and "heart-leaved skullcap."

Texas Pink Skullcap—If bright pink is your thing, the Texas pink skullcap will fit into your landscape. Scutellaria suffrutescens is a low-growing mound of pink that stays compact. The plant thrives in full sun, but can stand some shade. Since it is a perennial evergreen, they bloom pretty much all summer. Another plus is that they are very drought tolerant and are often used in rock gardens.

The Texas pink skullcap can grow up to 2 feet tall and 2 to 4 feet wide. However, mine generally stayed smaller. The plants will self-propagate in that stems that come in contact with the soil will root. Just separate the rooted stem from the mother plant, but give it a week or so in place before you move it. Alternatively, Wildflower.org notes that during the winter you can propagate skullcap from seeds or, during the growing season you can root a stem cutting.

Wright's Skullcap - Last summer I was visiting a nursery that specializes in native/adapted plants when I noticed a small upright plant with a striking purple flower. I'm always on the lookout for purple, so I bought six of them. They were labelled "upright, bushy skullcap," but a little investigative work showed that the plant's real name is Scutellaria wrightii or Wright's skullcap.

According to The Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, these native plants, like the pink skullcap, are evergreen and bloom from early spring through the summer. They stand 10 to 12 inches tall and get about 18 inches across. Instead of forming a mound, they have a more upright growth pattern. Again, they are low water users, can grow in full sun or part shade and require minimal care. I have had plants come up from seed and, when they were about 3 to 4 inches tall, I was able to transplant them successfully to other parts of my garden.

Heartleaf Skullcap—Scutellaria ovata, heartleaf skullcap, is another native plant that can be found growing wild in East and South Texas. Unlike Texas pink and Wright's skullcap, heartleaf or heart-leaf skullcap prefers

shade or part shade and moist conditions. This skullcap is also a perennial and grows up to 3 feet tall.

The “showy blue flowers bloom on spikes similar to *Salvia* species.” They attract hummingbirds and adult butterflies and are deer resistant. According to The Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center the heartleaf skullcap colonizes vigorously by underground, flesh roots.” It can form dense masses, so some control may be needed.

The plants in the skullcap family can provide interest to your garden both through color and shape. You may have to search for them, but check with locally-owned nurseries who are more likely to carry native plants and plants that are adapted to this area.

The Gardener’s Dirt is written by members of the Victoria County Master Gardener Association, an educational outreach of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Victoria County. Mail your questions in care of the Advocate, P.O. Box 1518, Victoria, TX 77901; or vcmga@vicad.com, or comment on this column at [Victoria Advocate.com](http://VictoriaAdvocate.com).

References:

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension
The Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center
Wikipedia
Texas SmartScape