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Try growing these rare Florida natives in your garden



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The quailberry, a close relative of the maidenberry, looks much like American holly. **Kenneth Setzer** - Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden

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Lots of native plants are getting common in Florida landscaping. Live oaks, cocoplum, firebush, even coonties are being utilized by municipalities and landscapers in commercial and residential scenarios.

Now it's time to get rare. Here are some native plants that are unusual — even locally owned garden shops don't often carry them. But if you can find them, as with most natives, these plants are fairly easy to maintain as they are adapted to our climate and poor, sandy soil.

The uncommon maidenberry (*Crossopetalum rhaetoma*) is a pretty pine rockland plant or hammock-edge plant that stays compact within shrub dimensions. It's a slow grower, perfect for a low-maintenance landscape. At a maximum height of about 8 to 10 feet, you can allow it to grow into a small tree, but otherwise tip the branches to encourage a fuller, bushy growth habit.

“MAIDENBERRY FLOWERS ARE INCONSPICUOUS, BUT THE FRUIT THAT FOLLOWS ... IS A BRILLIANT SCARLET AND VERY APPEALING TO BIRDS.”

Maidenberry flowers are inconspicuous, but the fruit that follows nearly throughout the year is a brilliant scarlet and very appealing to birds. As a rockland/hammock-edge plant, maidenberry grows best under bright sun planted in very quick-draining, sandy, rocky soil, but add a little compost or other organic matter to help it along.

A sibling to maidenberry is quailberry, aka Christmasberry (*Crossopetalum ilicifolium*). Like maidenberry, it inhabits only the very southern parts of Florida and the Caribbean. However the USDA plant profile curiously indicates quailberry as native also for North Carolina.

Quailberry sticks closer to the ground, at a modest maximum height of about a foot or two. It requires a sunny location, is drought tolerant and makes for a cheerful groundcover with its serrated, holly-like leaves and red fruit.

“QUAILBERRY ... MAKES FOR A CHEERFUL GROUNDCOVER WITH ITS SERRATED, HOLLY-LIKE LEAVES AND RED FRUIT.”

Another rarely cultivated native shrub is *Koanophyllum villosum*, shrub eupatorium. Roger Hammer, in "Attracting Hummingbirds and Butterflies in Tropical Florida," calls it thoroughwort. A thin shrub that grows to about six feet, *Koanophyllum* likes direct sun. I have one near the base of a tall coconut palm, to which I had tied it for support until established.

The flowers are very small, great in number, and white with a hint of blush. To me, they smell faintly of cinnamon toothpaste. Hammer notes it's a "top-notch butterfly attractor." Maybe if it were easier to ask for ...

Chiggy grapes (*Tournefortia hirsutissima*) is a semi-woody vine/shrub, native to rockland and coastal hammocks of the very southern portion of the state; it has also been reported from southern Texas. Its flowers, arranged in "scorpionid racemes" appear throughout the year, providing nectar for cassius blue and lyside sulphur butterflies while producing grape-like white drupes for other wildlife. Endangered and rarely cultivated. It is being researched for hypoglycemic properties.

FAIRCHILD FOUND THAT *LANTANA INVOLUCRATA* HAD A 100 PERCENT LOCAL SURVIVAL RATE, PROBABLY DUE TO ITS ABILITY TO TOLERATE A VARIETY OF SOIL TYPES.

Lastly, I'd love to see more native *Lantana*. The native Florida (and Caribbean) wild sage is *Lantana involucrata*. Its flowers are white and beloved by butterflies, skippers and bees; the purple fruit are a favorite of birds. (*Lantana camara*, a tropical native with showy bright orange and red flowers, is

not native to Florida.)

Fairchild's Connect to Protect Network, which assists residents in maintaining native plants, particularly of the pine rockland, tracked participants' plants from 2007-2016, and *Lantana involucrata* had an incredible 100 percent survival rate! This hardiness was attributed to its ability to tolerate a variety of soil types, given decent drainage. Unlike the plants above, this one tolerates coastal living and salt spray. Use it as a screen or form into a nice hedge.

I encourage you to check out the Connect to Protect Network, its resources and information on creating your own native pine rockland at www.fairchildgarden.org/science-conservation/connect-to-protect-network. These plants and more than 100 others will be available at Fairchild's Members' Day Plant Sale on Oct. 1 and 2. Read more on the plant sale at www.fairchildgarden.org/membersday.

Kenneth Setzer is writer and editor at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden.

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