



HOME & GARDEN

NOVEMBER 25, 2016 7:00 AM

Going native in the garden? Try these plants.



1 of 2

Rhynchospora floridensis, Florida Whitetop, a native sedge. **Kenneth Setzer** - Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden



BY KENNETH SETZER
Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden

Not all native plants are rare. In fact they needn’t be rare to be valued additions to the garden and landscape.

Rhynchospora floridensis, more easily known as Florida whitetop, appears randomly in my yard, though in a natural setting it prefers damp areas like pond and lake margins. This makes sense for sedges, which tend to inhabit wetlands. Whitetop is in the Cyperaceae (sedge) family, as is the papyrus of ancient Egyptian papermaking.

The common name would lead us to believe it is endemic to Florida. Indeed, the U.S..Department of Agriculture plant list shows it as native to only a few Florida counties. However whitetop also occurs in the Caribbean, Mexico and beyond.

It may seem contradictory for a wetland plant, but whitetop is very tolerant of drought conditions. Its tolerance, even preference, for low-nutrient soil means it gets along well as a member of the herbaceous layer of the pine rockland plant community. The poor soil explains why it appears in my yard occasionally.

Sedges are said to be graminoid, a fancy way to say “grasslike.” They have leaves that are long, thin blades along with what’s called a culm — the stem of a graminoid plant — which in this case bears white, starburst flowers with green tips about two feet above the ground.

“

IT MAY SEEM CONTRADICTORY FOR A WETLAND PLANT, BUT WHITETOP IS VERY TOLERANT OF DROUGHT CONDITIONS.

I’ve seen whitetop for sale by native-plant nurseries, but only rarely. If you can find it, then buy it, or find one going to seed and collect them — but not from natural areas or private property, of course. If you’ve ever seen these and wondered what they are, now you know it’s best not to consign it to the compost heap, but to leave it be. Let those flowers dance around in the wind above the sea of green.

The second native plant I’d like to present is *Poinsettia cyathophora*, known as painted leaf. Yep, it’s like the plant you get around Christmas, but it’s our very own native *Poinsettia*. You have probably encountered these in the less-manicured areas of your garden as a flash of hot red out of the corner of your eye. It stands out, with unexpected color in disturbed areas, hammock edges, and pinelands. And sometimes flowerpots.

We can’t claim this one as Floridian, however. It’s found throughout much of the South, west to California and north through much of the Midwest.

Painted leaf, like whitetop, grows only about two or three feet tall and is best propagated from seeds, which are small and resemble tomato seeds. Like many other euphorbs, painted leaf’s beautiful red “flower” is not a flower at all. Its pretty bright red color, like the deep red of holiday *Poinsettia*, comes not from the flower but from specialized leaves called bracts. The bracts in some cases are thought to lead pollinators to the rather unassuming flower, like airport runway lights. The actual flowers of the painted leaf are yellowy-green and not all that showy.

All poinsettias are in the euphorbia family, and therefore produce a milky latex sap that can irritate the skin and eyes. This is the family, Euphorbiaceae, to which the dreaded, nearly mythical manchineel tree (*Hippomane mancinella*) with its toxic fruit belongs. But painted leaf is nothing to worry about. Just don’t eat it.