

CORAL GABLES

THE MAGAZINE



Home & Garden

Bring on the Flowering Trees

NOW IS THE TIME OF YEAR TO PLANT FLOWERING TREES FOR YOUR ELEGANT TROPICAL GARDEN LANDSCAPE

Words and Photos by Kenneth Setzer



The *Tabebuia aurea* drops its leaves before flowering

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With the heat and frequent rains of summer, now is the best time of the year to plant new trees. And what better than the tropical flowering tree option? They are many and varied, and provide a magnificent point of interest in an elegant tropical garden. Just keep in mind to choose them not only for beauty, but for storm resistance, troublesome roots, and whether the tree is exceedingly messy. Meeting those criteria, here is a selection of the best. Just imagine any of these lining a driveway, street, or as an accent tree in the garden. You can combine colors and trees that blossom in different seasons to ensure your tropical paradise is always in color!

1. Classic red royal poinciana, a Miami favorite for over a century
2. Flowers, buds and cascading foliage of Colville's glory
3. *Jacaranda cuspidifolia*'s flower color differs based on soil pH
4. The Long John tree, an underutilized tree with hot pink fruit
5. *Cassia fistula x javanica*, a hybrid with yellow and pink in its blooms
6. Ceylon Senna's fall tropical color and shade

THE TREE OF FIRE

No mention of tropical trees is complete without the royal poinciana, *Delonix regia*. A Spanish name for it is *Arbol del fuego*, certainly more evocative of its hot tropical beauty. They're a common sight along South Florida streets, and for good reason. They are drought tolerant once established, preferring very little water in winter, so are nearly maintenance free. They're also tough; at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden, one planted in 1974 is thriving still.

The flowers, of course, are what we are after. The umbrella-shaped poinciana is just as fire with them in late spring, especially after a period of dry weather. Different trees range from crimson to reddish orange; there is even a golden yellow variety, *Delonix regia* var. *flavida*, and cultivars including 'Kampong yellow' and 'Smathers gold.' The fruit are woody seed pods a foot or so long, and a little messy. The roots are shallow and spreading, and the trunk produces buttresses, so plant the poinciana well away from structures.

GOLDEN AND PURPLE BELLS

Tabebuia species of trees (photo page 73) can produce shades of pink, magenta or yellow flowers. The yellow is less cold tolerant, but more eye-catching. They seem to glow from within. Both *Tabebuia chrysothricha* and *T. aurea* (Caribbean trumpet tree) are yellow flowering, the latter more common. The flowers are bell shaped and especially showy because the tree usually sheds its leaves before flowering.

Tabebuia is shallow rooted and flowers in late spring after a winter dry season. Plant in full sun and they may reach 20-35 feet. *Tabebuia 'Carib Queen'* is a hybrid to consider if you prefer deep magenta flowers. The tree will reach about 20 feet. For a splash of grape-purple try a *Tibouchina*. A smaller tree than *Tabebuia* (those in cultivation probably won't exceed 15 feet), purple *Tibouchina* may flower throughout the year, more in warmer months. These trees prefer some shelter from the wind and the harshest midday sun, and some soil-acidifying fertilizer.

STRAIGHT FROM MADAGASCAR

Colville's glory (*Colvillea racemosa*), like the royal poinciana, is native to Madagascar. Unlike poinciana however, Colvillea is rare in cultivation. But it is well worth trying to find. Its foliage is pinnate like a fern, very wispy and fine, providing enchanting, dappled, rippling shade. Preferring full sun, Colvillea will reach 50 feet, a stunner with long, cone-shaped racemes – flowers attached along a stem – clustered with bright yellow and orange blooms that appear in fall. It truly is a glory, and drought tolerant!

SPANISH PURPLE

Is it blue or purple? Opinions differ, but *Jacaranda* flowers are affected by soil acidity, with more alkaline soil like ours in South Florida producing shades toward blue. You are likely to find *Jacaranda mimosifolia*, *J. caerulea* or *J. cuspidifolia*.



lia (pictured) for sale. The last can reach 30 feet or so and seems to be the most common. It should flower in drier months, because it likes dry climates – anyone who has travelled through Spain has seen them flower profusely. The one pictured flowers in April, the tail end of Florida's dry weather. Its foliage is feathery and fern-like, and its fruit are seedpods that look like 2- to 3-inch-long turtle shells. Needs direct sun.

VERTICAL RED

There don't seem to be many Long John trees in private gardens, but *Triplaris cummingiana* (also called the ant tree) fits beautifully into areas of full sun to some shade; and like many of our trees, it prefers dry winters and wet summers. It flowers and fruits in winter, an unexpected delight. The Long John tree can attain 50 feet and higher, but is more pyramidal and less spreading than royal poinciana, for example.

SMALLER TREES

Finally come the cassias, slightly smaller tropical trees. There's a good deal of variability in some *Cassia* species with hybrids available. *Cassia fistula x javanica*, the rainbow shower tree, is one such hybrid. Its parents produce yellow and pink flowers, so you may see a bit of both colors in this one. Thriving under full sun, it'll reach about 20 feet maximum, and forms a nicely compact tree of colorful blossoms along racemes in spring and summer, fading to creamy white with age.

CASCADING CANOPIES

Cassia roxburghii, or Ceylon Senna, is native to Sri Lanka and southern India. It forms a large, cascading canopy up to 30 feet tall of fine, feathery foliage. When it flowers in late summer/early fall (photo taken in November), the deep pink and red flowers carpet the waterfall of weeping branches. It's a wonderful shade tree, preferring full sun to part shade.

We are lucky to also be able to grow *Cassia bakeriana*, sometimes called the pink shower tree. From Southeast Asia, it prefers a sunny, sheltered area, but is worth it when the flowers appear.

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