



Now a common landscape plant, *Clerodendrum quadriloculare* or starburst clerodendrum. Kenneth Setzer - Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden

HOME & GARDEN

Summer doldrums in the garden? Try this plant that David Fairchild found in Indonesia

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I thought plants in the genus *Clerodendrum* would make an interesting article because they offer us some very familiar garden plants as well as some that are fairly rare and quite odd. But, as usual, the plants took me on a slightly different journey. They took me, in a way, to the exotic and botanically rich Southeast Asia of the 1940s.

The sequence of events leading me down this botanical rabbit hole of wonder is this: I was looking up common names for a rather odd plant growing at Fairchild, with fruit that looks like starfish. I was specifically interested in the tongue torturer *Clerodendrum minahassae* var. *brevitubulosum* and found it is often called “Fairchild’s clerodendrum.” This must mean something interesting, so into our botanic database I went, typed in the plant name, and found an amazing provenance for this plant:

“Collected directly from the wild, April 17, 1940. Source: David Fairchild.”

This bushy tree with fruit like a red plastic starfish holding a blue pearl was collected by Dr. Fairchild himself while aboard the Cheng Ho expedition to Southeast Asia. Even later in life, when offered the chance to sail to and explore the Moluccas, aka Spice Islands, Fairchild didn’t hesitate to board the custom-made Cheng Ho. The expedition began in 1940 and Fairchild planned on two years of plant collecting.

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The starfish-like fruit of Fairchild’s clerodendrum. KENNETH SETZER - Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden

The onset of World War II cut the expedition short, but not before Fairchild collected an odd bush growing in Masamba, South Sulawesi, Indonesia — the *Clerodendrum* flourishing to this day. It’s uncommon in cultivation, though highly ornamental. Looking up the record of its nearly 80 years at Fairchild, I see it seems to have been defoliated by cold spells, but has recovered each time. A self-seeding small tree with long, tubular white flowers, it would make a stunning screen plant, especially with its bizarre fruit.

Another *Clerodendrum* is a now-common landscape plant: *Clerodendrum quadriloculare*, the starburst clerodendrum. It’s another bushy, small tree that grows to about 12 feet. It flowers in late winter and spring. Greenish-gray leaves — matte aubergine purple beneath — provide a perfect showcase for the explosion, or starburst, of magenta and white flowers. This *Clerodendrum* will produce suckers you may want to remove or allow to fill an otherwise bare area. After it flowers, it

should be cut back to ensure bushiness. You can also train it into a more tree-like form by pruning for a single trunk.

Another favorite for butterflies and hummingbirds is the bleeding heart vine. *Clerodendrum thomsoniae* is from western Africa. It’s a climber and won’t become a tree, but will cover a trellis with ease. The corolla — all the petals taken collectively — is red. The sepals are the part of a flower, usually green, that enclose and protect the petals when it’s still a bud. Taken as a whole the sepals are called the calyx. It is white in this plant. Except when it’s not, as in *Clerodendrum thomsoniae* ‘Delectum,’ aka magenta bleeding heart.



Clerodendrum splendens, flaming glorybower, can cover large structures. KENNETH SETZER - Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden

If you’re looking to cover an arbor or large trellis, consider *Clerodendrum splendens*. Flaming glorybower reminds me of a more intense, more robust version of bleeding heart and one once blanketed the northeast edge of the Vine Pergola at Fairchild. It needs strong support.

Clerodendrum paniculatum, pagoda flower, in warmer months produces upright panicles of small, brick red flowers held in a tiered pyramid, like a pagoda. It is a Southeast Asia native and will form a short, bushy plant that grows to about 6 feet tall. It also produces suckers and can be a bit of a spreader. It’s such a great butterfly nectar plant that there are quite a few here in the Wings of the Tropics butterfly conservatory.



Clerodendrum paniculatum, pagoda flower. KENNETH SETZER - Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden

All of these clerodendrums need full to part sun and warmth. In cooler zones, they may be grown as annuals. Though some like to spread out, a little pruning will be worth it, especially when the butterflies come.

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



Photo of Fairchild’s clerodendrum taken after its collection in Indonesia, 1940. David Fairchild Archives - Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden