



UNIVERSITY OF
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Friday's Feature
by
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2006 Florida Plants of the Year

The Florida Nursery, Growers and Landscape Association (FNGLA) recently announced their 2006 selections for Florida Plants of the Year. The Florida Plants of the Year program is designed to promote the use of superior and proven Florida plants.

Launched in 1998, the Florida Plants of the Year program promotes the use of under-utilized, but proven, Florida plant material. Ornamentals are selected on an annual basis by a group of growers, horticulturists, retailers, landscape professionals, and University of Florida faculty.

This year's selection includes palms, perennials and several tropical plants. You can view all the plant selections at www.fnga.org. Several of the selections are more suited for warmer climates but a few can be grown successfully in our local landscapes or used as houseplants.

The cast-iron plant, known botanically as *Aspidistra*, is very appropriately named. Introduced in 1824, *Aspidistra* were used as houseplants in Victorian parlors. It remains a popular choice because of its "hard as iron" constitution.

Cast-iron plants were made for those who don't think they have green-thumbs. Sturdy, long-lived and nearly bulletproof, these evergreen perennials will tolerate very low light and almost total neglect.

Aspidistra 'Milky Way', this year's FNGLA selection, forms a slowly spreading clump of dark green leaves that are glossy and speckled with white. It can be used as a groundcover or as a houseplant and is ideal for shaded gardens.

In the landscape, the cast iron plant produces inconspicuous purple flowers spikes. You will find the bizarre lily pad-like flowers at the base of the foliage, where they are usually appreciated only by snails and slugs.

Plant care is simple. Keep them on the dry side and keep them in low light conditions. After landscape establishment, water them only when the soil dries to avoid root rots and insects. Clumps of cast iron plants may be divided, but look out for nests of paper wasps that sometimes take up housekeeping on the underside of the broad leaves.

Phalaenopsis Baldan's Kaleidoscope 'Golden Treasure', an orchid, is another 2006 Plant of the Year. These orchids are sometimes called the moth orchids because their broad flowers look a bit like colorful moths. The flower of this orchid has red lips, reddish purple striping and a strong yellow background that lightens to pale yellow. It received the American Orchid Society's Award of Merit because of its colorful prolific blooms.

Like other *Phalaenopsis*, this one grows well in bright light but not in direct sun. An east window is ideal, but they also thrive in shaded south or west-facing windows. Plants do best at day temperatures of 70 to 80 degrees F and 60 to 65 degrees F at night. They prefer a high relative humidity of 50 to 80 percent.

African blue basil (*Ocimum sp. hybrid*) is another variation on a houseplant that can be grown outdoors. It has been around since 1982. While it can be used as a seasoning herb, its value is more ornamental than culinary.

African blue basil plants form clumps about two feet tall and three feet wide. The plants have a purplish-blue cast. Leaf veins, flower spikes and stems are purple while the rest is green. A sweet camphor aroma is noticed with this plant.

Because the plant is sterile and never makes a seed, flower stems are longer, up to 18 inches, and blooms until frost. Individual flowers can be plucked from the stem or whole stem segments can be used for a dramatic addition to a culinary bouquet.

African blue basil is more suited to indoor growing than most basil. If you want to over winter the plant, either grow it through the summer in a pot and move it in before frost or grow it in the ground and take tip cuttings in early fall. These are easily started in a glass of water and then transferred to a pot for the winter.

Yellow African bulbine (*Bulbine frutescens*) is another 2006 FNGLA selection. Leaves are fleshy, bright green, and shaped like slender, pointed pencils. It blooms in late spring to early summer and produces many star-shaped yellow or orange flowers that resemble those of aloe. To encourage further flowering, dead flower heads should be removed.

Bulbine is very tolerant of poor, dry conditions and grows best in well-drained soil. Be careful not to over water this plant. It prefers full sun. Although it will grow in containers indoors, it requires maximum light. Bulbine is hardy in zones 9B to 11. Since most of Northwest Florida is in zone 8, this plant should be protected during cold weather.

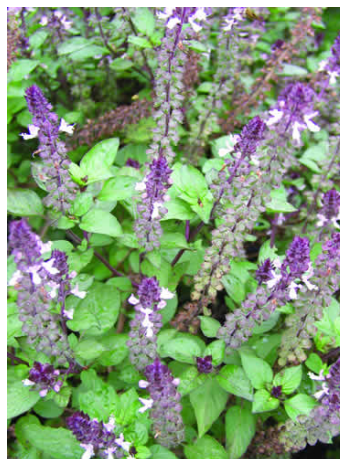
Look for these plants at a garden center near you. I can't promise that you'll find them at every nursery or garden center but consumer awareness can help encourage better availability in the future.



Cast Iron plants can be used in the landscape under low light conditions. They do not need much moisture. Photo by Stephen Pategas-Hortus Oasis, courtesy of FNGLA



Phalaenopsis 'Baldan's Kaleidoscope 'Golden Treasure'', and was selected because of its colorful flowers. Photo by Altria Labs - Plants LLC, courtesy FNGLA.



African blue basil is an ornamental herb, grown more for its colorful flower stalks and leaves than for its use as a seasoning. Photo by Dr Rick Schoellhorn, courtesy of FNGLA



Yellow African Bulbine is a flowering groundcover that grows in clumps. Photo by Leu Gardens, courtesy of FNGLA

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.