Blooming, Root-Hardy Shrubs for Summer Blooms in Full Sun

June is a good month to consider the hot weather root- hardy perennials. The list includes esperanza, poinciana, duranta, vitex, firebush, thyrallis and milkweed. Grow them all in full sun. All are drought tolerant.

Esperanza has yellow tubular flowers on light green foliage that the deer do not usually eat. They grow to 7 feet tall when they freeze back but will double that size if it is a mild winter. Seek out the “Goldstar” selection, it is a blooming machine. Butterflies and hummingbirds are attracted to esperanza.

Poinciana is also called “Pride of Barbados”. It has an airy, layered growth pattern and produces “glow in the dark” orange-yellow blooms on a 7ft. plant. Like esperanza it is a good butterfly plant but the deer do eat poinciana.

Duranta has light purple or white blooms followed by yellow berries. It is sometimes called Brazilian sky flower. It will also grow to about 7ft. tall. The berries are not a favorite bird food but there are times when the plant will be completely covered with butterflies.

Vitex generally does not freeze back so it will produce a 25ft. tall tree unless it is cut back. Some gardeners cut it back every year to the ground so that its purple blooms are formed on a 6ft. shrub. Deer do not eat vitex. It is a favorite hummingbird nectar source.

Firebush has small red tubular blooms. The plant grows to 7 ft. most summers. In the fall when the migrating hummingbirds move into the area, firebush is a favorite food source. Put it in a container on the patio and it will be the center of hummingbird aerial dogfights. In a 10 gallon container firebush is a disciplined grower that only produces a 3 ft. tall and 3ft. wide plant. Deer will eat firebush.

Thyrallis produces yellow blooms on its 7ft. branches. The blooms are tiny but they cover the upright stems and are quite showy. I grow thyrallis in plantings with esperanza. They complement each other in landscape thickets and both are deer-proof in my neighborhood.

Were you surprised when I listed milkweed with the semi-tropical woody plants like esperanza? It is true that milkweed is more herbaceous than woody but the perennial plant does return from its roots every year to produce blooms. True, the blooms aren’t usually as attractive as the other plants listed, but planting milkweed is important as we attempt to for restore the Monarch butterfly population.

 Bad weather on the wintering grounds in 2010-2011 wiped out a majority of the Monarchs and encouraged naturalists to assess the habitat situation. Monarchs only lay eggs on milkweed and much of the milkweed has been removed on its breeding grounds in the US, including here in South Texas. The “idea” is to restore milkweed in landscapes and natural areas so Monarchs have more sites to produce caterpillars. Three to 5 milkweeds in every landscape would go a long way to restore the Monarch’s ability to restore itself.

On your next trip to your favorite nursery obtain some milkweed. The easiest milkweed to find is usually the tropical milkweed. Tropical milkweed has attractive blooms and is a favorite egg-laying site for Monarchs. The most common native milkweed in nurseries, “butterfly weed” (Asclepias tuberosa) also has attractive blooms but is a less effective caterpillar food plant. The most common milkweeds growing wild in Texas are green milkweed and antelope-horn milkweed. The flowers are less attractive than those of tuberosa, but they are better egg laying sites. One effective tactic to insure attractive flowers, plenty of nectar, and egg-laying sites is to plant both tropical milkweed and any of the native milkweeds you can find.