

Popular Nectar Producing Plants in the Autumn
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Last week I wrote about salvias and lantanas. There are many species and selections available, most of which are drought tolerant and deer proof. They also are major sources of nectar for butterflies, hummingbirds, and other pollinators. Cape honeysuckle, firespike, Mexican honeysuckle, Mexican flame vine, and duranta are also favorite nectar sources that have attractive blooms in the autumn. They will be more prominent in future growing seasons but are generally available for planting in bloom this fall.

Cape honeysuckle is not really a honeysuckle; its Latin name is *Tecoma capensis* and it is in the same genus as *esperanza*. It evolved in the Southern Hemisphere, South Africa, but is a longtime favorite plant for Texas landscapes.

The cape honeysuckle looks like a miniature (and less aggressive) trumpet creeper. Because of its Southern Hemisphere origin, it blooms in the fall in Texas.

Grow cape honeysuckle in full sun on a trellis or against a wall or fence. It is a leaning vine rather than a grasping or twining vine. The stems are stiff enough that it can be trained as a shrub. It will grow to 10 feet tall. The flowers are quarter-sized and tubular. They are usually orange but there is a yellow version in South Africa. As one would suspect looking at the flowers, they are a favorite nectar source for the hummingbirds.

Cape honeysuckle defoliates every winter and dies back to the roots during cold winters.

Firespike (*Odontonema strictum*) has dark green, shiny foliage. With the attractive foliage and extreme shade tolerance, it is often used as a house plant. Outside in a container or in a sheltered spot in the shrub border, firespike will produce red tubular flowers or tall spikes above the lush foliage every autumn until cold weather arrives in November.

The red flowers are showy and a favorite of hummingbirds as a nectar source. Place it in a decorative container on a shady patio and it has the same hummingbird attraction power that firebush has in full sun.

Firespike in containers can be moved to a greenhouse or even into the house for cold protection. In warm micro-climates like the Riverwalk where firespike does not freeze back in the winter, it can grow to 8 or 10 feet tall. In most San Antonio gardens, however, the roots will not survive the winter if the plant is left outside.

Mexican honeysuckle (*Justicia spicigera*) produces orange blooms over a long season on an evergreen mound that grows to 5 feet tall and 7 feet across. Hummingbirds and other pollinators use it as a nectar source year around and especially in the fall.

It is especially desirable as a landscape shrub because the deer do not eat it and even though it may wilt in the kind of hot, dry weather we had this summer, it quickly recovers.

Mexican honeysuckle blooms well in partial shade or morning and late afternoon sun.

Mexican flame vine (*Psuedogynoxys chenopodioides*) produces orange flowers with yellow centers on a twining vine that performs equally well on a trellis, fence or over the ground. Grow it in full sun or partial shade. Butterflies really seem to notice the blooms in the fall when it will often be covered with nectar seekers.

Duranta is also called Brazilian sky flower (*D. stenostachya* and *erecta*). It produces blue or white flowers on a shrub that grows to about 6 feet tall and 6 feet wide. The vine like stalks of flowers are followed by waxy yellow berries.

In the fall the attractive flowers will be covered by Monarchs, Queens and other butterfly species feasting on the nectar provided by the blooms. It would be perfect if the berries were as popular to fruit eating bird species as the nectar is to the pollinators, but in my landscape that has never been the case. Some of the berries may get eaten by the end of winter, but mostly they provide decoration for the stems.

Duranta has a similar natural history as *esperanza* or *poinciana*, usually freezing back to ground level every winter.