

BRANCHING OUT

Blooming trees can add jolts of color to Southwest Florida landscapes

by Michael Allen

Many things in life come easily. Others take time and patience. That's certainly the case when it comes to the plant world. Any gardener could tell you that some plants are easy. Others, however, require a Zen-like sense of patience. But it is from these kinds of plants that the true pleasures of gardening are often derived, from the plants that require an extra bit of skill or sense of artistry, not from the carefree, ever-blooming, ever-producing ones. As anyone who has truly enjoyed the beauty of the plant world can tell you, some things are worth the wait.

Blooming trees can offer just this type of horticultural pleasure. In Southwest Florida, unlike other areas of the country, our canopy trees hold the potential of offering much more than just the usual shade. Our subtropical climate brings forth options for blooming trees with a palette of color and a profusion of scent like few other areas of the world. And while many of these trees are extremely prolific, blooming time and time again throughout the year, others produce less easily, often with brief, yet intense, explosions of color that stop most people in their tracks. Trees that one day appear simply as masses of green foliage—or, in some cases, skeletons of brittle branches—transform into towering beauties covered in vibrant flowers. And when it comes to these types of showstopping trees, gardeners here have many options from which to choose, no matter the time of year.

PHOTO BY RHONDA MANDEL



Crepe myrtles are popular trees throughout the South, with long-lasting summertime blooms in a variety of colors.

SPRING

Spring is still the most common time to see flowering trees in bloom. And despite our year-round warmth and sunshine, a springtime display of color is always welcome, especially blooming specimen trees, with their stature and dominance in the landscape.

The jacaranda (*Jacaranda acutifolia*) might be one of the more widely noticed, if not recognized, of these impressive spring bloomers. It is extremely large—up to sixty feet—which may preclude its use in many smaller-scale homesites. But if space allows, the jacaranda can be a majestic specimen and, when in bloom, impossible to ignore. The large upright tree lies dormant and bare throughout the winter, but then in early spring releases a profusion of purple panicles (or flower clusters), covering the entire canopy of the tree. These flowers are then followed by the release of the tree's fine, feathery foliage, which gives it an unusually soft and delicate

appearance.

The jacaranda is well suited to Southwest Florida. It tolerates a wide variety of soils and is somewhat drought tolerant. It needs, however, some moderate care, irrigation, and nutrition.

Although nowhere near as large, the frangipani plumeria (*Plumeria acuminata*) is another tree that lies bare throughout the winter, then blooms in the spring before its release of foliage. Frangipani plumeria is relatively small in stature, reaching only twenty feet at most. Some varieties are downright shrub-like and might need a bit of pruning to achieve a tree-like appearance. The branches are thick and succulent—even brittle at times—and are not known for their structural integrity.

When leafless, the tree can seem rangy, wild, and even borderline unattractive.

To be sure, during winter, some gardeners have stared at their barren,



dormant frangipani plumeria and wondered why on earth they planted such a silly-looking tree. But when spring arrives, all doubts are put to rest. For the frangipani plumeria produces some of the most prized flowers on the globe. They are, in fact, most commonly used for the famous Hawaiian lei. The blooms are typically either white or yellow delicate tubular flowers, but they can also come in a number of other colors, shapes, and sizes.

Many gardeners have a passion for frangipani plumeria flowers that is rivaled only by orchids. Generations of





gardeners have bred and hybridized frangipani plumerias for pleasure and profit, giving rise to innumerable plumeria clubs, societies, and events.

In the landscape, frangipani plumerias can be a welcome addition. Like so many other heavily hybridized flowering plants, not all varieties are suited for landscaping purposes. Care should be given to selecting a variety that is attractive in both bloom and structure. The tree is tropical and will not tolerate cold temperatures. It prefers a rich, moist, organic soil. Some soil amending and ample irrigation is recommended.

A tree that is perfectly suited to Florida's climate and soil is the orange geiger (*Cordia sebestena*). Despite being a Florida native, this compact, small tree is vastly underused in Southwest Florida. The orange geiger is attractive whether in or out of bloom. It is evergreen, with rich, dark, leathery leaves that are

unusually coarse to the touch.

The tree itself is small in size and somewhat shrub-like. Over time, it can reach a size of nearly thirty feet but is more commonly seen in the range of twelve to fifteen feet. Its canopy is dense and rounded but can become wild-looking if not judiciously pruned. The flowers appear in late spring, forming small clusters of a dark orange or scarlet color. Orange geiger is nearly bulletproof, thriving in Southwest Florida's sandy soils. It is drought tolerant, somewhat cold hardy, and extremely salt tolerant.

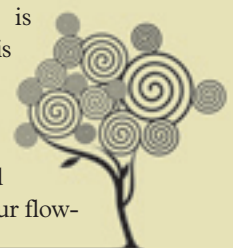
SUMMER

For large trees that can make a big splash, summer is definitely the season. Several grand specimen trees—and a few small ones—put

on a big show during this season, famously painting Southwest Florida neighborhoods with an array of colors.

Most well-known of these summer bloomers is the royal poinciana (*Delonix regia*). This African native lives up to its name, as its canopy develops into a large, broad, somewhat flattened crown. The tree needs some space, more horizontally than vertically. Reaching a maximum height of only thirty feet, the crown of the tree grows fifty feet wide or more. It forms an appealing network of branches atop a squat, thick trunk and provides unparalleled shade.

The leaves are fine and feathery, softening the look of an otherwise robust appearance, and in large open spaces, the royal poinciana is attractive year-round. It is in the summer, however, that it deservedly garners the most attention. It is widely considered the most impressive of our flow-



The royal poinciana (above) blooms during the summer and boasts a large, broad crown; the springtime flowers of the frangipani plumeria (opposite top) are a favorite among many gardeners; purple panicles can be seen on the area's jacaranda trees (opposite bottom) during the spring.

ering trees, and with good reason. Once a year, the tree erupts in a riot of color, blanketing its crown with a profusion of bright orange flowers. The show doesn't last long, but the enjoyment of seeing the tree in bloom lingers after the flowers are gone.

Royal poinciana is nicely suited to Southwest Florida's climate and environment. It grows well in sandy soils and is drought tolerant. Only minimal irrigation and fertilization is required.

Similar to the royal poinciana in both name and form, but not officially related, is the yellow poinciana (*Peltophorum pterocarpum*). The yellow poinciana has nearly identical leaves and structure to the royal poinciana but has a more upright, less flattened crown. Yellow poinciana still provides excellent shade and looks best when given ample room. It reaches a height of nearly fifty feet and is just as wide. Like the royal poinciana, this tree also puts on a brief yet impressive display, in this case of yellow flowers that give off an aro-

matic perfume. The tree tolerates a wide variety of soils and is drought tolerant. It is moderately cold hardy and receives only minimal damage during brief freezes.

The most famous of the smaller summer bloomers is the crepe myrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica*). Crepe myrtles have become ubiquitous in the South, as both a common streetside tree and a mainstay in most landscapes. The crepe myrtle is extremely versatile. It stays small in size—growing up to twenty-five feet at the most—and therefore fits nicely into a variety of locations and designs.

For flower power, crepe myrtles are hard to beat. They come in a wide variety of colors—usually whites, pinks, or reds—and give off a powerful display throughout most of the summer. Because their branch structure is attractive, even when not in bloom, it is best to avoid over-pruning. Even its bark



adds to the crepe myrtle's appeal; as the tree sheds off thin, papery layers of bark, it reveals a slightly different color of trunk. Overall, they are some of the most beautiful, easy-to-care-for summer bloomers around.

FALL & WINTER

Very few trees bloom in the fall and winter, but there are a few exceptions. These trees fill an important void and can add seasonal color when it is often difficult to come by.

The flamegold tree (*Koelreuteria elegans*) is an attractive, medium-sized



BOTTOM PHOTO BY RHONDA MANDEL



tree that provides fall color. While it blooms in mid-summer, the quick display of large panicles of yellow, fragrant flowers soon gives way to pink and red papery seed capsules, which stay on the tree throughout the fall. These “Chinese lanterns” sit atop a large, broad canopy of small, elegant, compound leaves.

The flamegold tree begins as a fairly small tree with an open, rounded canopy and is commonly used in streetscapes, on patios, and in other areas where small trees are desired. Over time, however, the tree will grow to become much broader and flattened in appearance and will perform best when given a little more room. Some pruning will be required to ensure a neat appearance, but otherwise, the tree is easy to care for. It is tolerant of many soils and can survive droughts once established.

The flamegold tree is easily confused with other trees of the same genus, such as the goldenraintree (*K. paniculata*) and Chinese flame tree (*K. bipinnata*), because of similar flower and seed characteristics. While the goldenraintree and Chinese flame tree are both more cold hardy, the flamegold tree is evergreen and potentially better suited for Southwest Florida.

The Hong Kong orchid tree (*Bauhinia blakeana*), of Asian descent, as the name would imply, is one of only a few options for winter blooms. It is a widely crowned, often asymmetrical tree that can take a dominant place in the landscape if given adequate space. It reaches a typical height of forty feet with a thirty-foot canopy. It has broad, unusual “bipartite,” or fused, leaves—only rarely found in the tree

world—giving the tree some of its unique appeal.

The form of the Hong Kong orchid tree is sometimes too inconsistent for some homeowners. It is often wild and rangy in appearance if not properly pruned and therefore will require some care when young. This extra work, however, will pay off once the tree blooms. The yearly deluge of flowers makes it a true standout. Large, purple flowers appear in long sprays at the branch tips. The flowers are, as one might guess, reminiscent in shape and color to that of many orchids. The tree is a delight when in bloom and provides an often much-needed dose of winter color. 🌸

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The crepe myrtle (above) stays relatively small in size, so it can be used in a variety of landscapes; the Hong Kong orchid tree (opposite top) can add winter color to area gardens; the yellow poinciana (opposite bottom) provides good shade from the summer sun.