

Horticulture Hints

A Publication of the Floral City Garden Club
April/May 2023

Presented by Kathy Lingusky

Yes, I totally blew off April. By the time my head came out of the water (aka 'plant sale'), it was way too late to try to salvage the month of April. So here we are, nearly *real* summer, ready for heat and rain (we hope!)

I haven't started any seeds this spring, like I usually do. Most notably, okra, one of the few things that thrive in the heat of Florida summers. We're planning to go to sunny, cool Colorado for the better part of the summer, so I'm heavily mulching all my raised beds, as well as other beds, and hoping for the best. A friend is watering everything in pots, so hopefully I won't lose much. What I really hope not to lose are the bananas and cassava plants. Cassava is a very long-season crop (planted in March, harvested in November), and will survive the heat just fine, I just have to hope for enough rain.

In the last newsletter, I promised talking about milkweed propagation. It's a somewhat complex subject. After *exhaustive* research, I have found that no one can give a single, definitive method for propagating milkweed except to take root cuttings from established colonies. This applies across the board for the native varieties referred to in the previous newsletter, and success rates are very nearly 100% for people using this method. Having said that, stem cuttings have produced a success rate of about 50% (both of these methods are assuming that you have established colonies) for the different varieties of these native milkweeds. The method used here is to take a cutting of 6-10 inches of stem, remove all but the top 2 leaves. Then scrape the bottom 3-4 inches of the stem (removing the hairy or tough outer coating), and apply a rooting hormone to this area. Using a pencil or other such, poke a hole in the rooting medium (recommended is a combination of peat

moss and perlite). Place the stem cutting in the hole and gently press the medium around it. You don't want to remove the painstakingly applied rooting hormone. Seems to work best if you can add a greenhouse-like covering to the pot, even if just putting plastic wrap over the cutting, with a hole in the plastic to accommodate the cutting, then securing the plastic with a rubber band.

Now, let's talk about those abundant seeds that the flowers subsequently produce. The consensus on seed propagation is that the



A. Verticillata seed pod, just opened

seeds are most fertile (easiest to germinate) if planted immediately after the seed pod opens naturally. If you are unable to do that

(as in, ordering seeds online) germination rates go down dramatically. Some varieties require cold stratification for 6-12 weeks, but most native Florida varieties require long



A. perennis, closed pod, and opening

periods of soaking or prolonged time in a greenhouse environment in order to germinate. Following is a method I've found that works really well for seeds that have those hard outer coatings.

Scarify your seeds first. Take each seed individually and scrape it lightly on fine sand paper or an emery board. Liberally moisten a paper towel laid flat on a flat surface. Place the seeds individually (you don't want a pile of seeds - spread them out). Gently fold the paper towel over the seeds, sprinkling the top side liberally with cinnamon (this acts as an antibacterial and antifungal). Then put the whole thing in a small ziplock bag in a quiet spot on your kitchen counter. One side of the packet will have only one layer of paper towel over the seeds, and if you turn it over, you should be able to see a little bit of what's going on in there. It may take weeks before you see anything going on, but as soon as you see something emerging from a seed, open the packet, remove the germinating seed, (what you see will be the root starting

to show itself) and place it gently in moistened seed starting mix. Cover lightly with more moist starting medium, water always *from the bottom*, and wait for the stem to start showing itself above the surface. When the first set of true leaves grows out, you are free to pot it up into actual potting soil or in the garden. If you have other seeds in the moist packet that haven't germinated yet, just close it back up, put it back in the plastic bag, and wait some more.

Back to cuttings for a moment: *Asclepias Tuberosa*, butterfly weed, seems to be the



A. Tuberosa, butterfly weed

exception to the previously-referred-to rule about a 50% success rate. Rooting cuttings taken from this plant have a very high rate of success, either started in water or seed starting medium. It also seems to be the easiest of the native milkweeds to get a hold of.

It seems that there needs to be a fair amount of experimentation when it comes to milkweed. If you choose to take the easy route (and no one will blame you!) and get tropical milkweed at big box stores, just remember to cut it back to about 6 inches in November. That's all there is to it.

If I don't get to see you at the year-end picnic, have a great summer, and happy gardening!