

2004 Fairchild Plants of the Year

By David Bar-Zvi

For decades, new plants have been introduced into cultivation through the botanic garden network. Many plants have been introduced sometimes with little or no fanfare. These have included native and exotic species. Recently members of Fairchild's horticulture staff established an annual plant award program called "Plants of the Year." The winners for this year are seldom seen in South Florida gardens although they have great charm, are easy to grow and have few problems in cultivation. We think that you will agree.



Mary Collins/FTBG



Mary Collins/FTBG



Mary Collins/FTBG

Guaiacum sanctum
Family: Zygophyllaceae
Common Name: Lignum Vitae

Lignum vitae's violet blue flowers cloaking dark green, glossy leaves make it an outstanding choice for almost any garden. This rare Florida native tree occurs in coastal forests of the West Indies, Mexico and Central America. In South Florida it is underused in the landscape and even has potential as a container plant for indoor/outdoor locations.

With its dense, rounded habit, Lignum Vitae lends a special texture to the garden. It is a small tree, usually less than 20 feet tall, periodically graced at the same time with flowers and ornamental yellow fruits which open to reveal a single black seed covered in a showy, red aril.

Lignum Vitae grows successfully in a wide range of soil types and once established, is drought and salt tolerant. Regular irrigation and fertilizing will enhance growth in this plant, reputed to be a slow grower. Although it flowers best in full sun, it can flourish in partial shade. There are no significant insect pests or diseases associated with this species. Lignum Vitae is easily propagated from seed.

Plumeria pudica
Family: Apocynaceae
**Common Name: Bridal Bouquet
Plumeria**

Plumeria pudica, a perpetual bloomer with clusters of luminous white flowers and contrasting, unusually shaped, evergreen leaves, is a gem for gardens in South Florida. A native of Panama, Colombia and Venezuela, it is a relatively new introduction to nurseries.

A medium-sized flowering tree, it may grow to 20' with an upright habit, retaining its spoon-shaped leaves for much of the length of the branches. Early thinning of branches will establish a strong framework and fuller shape. A preference for a perfectly drained, full sun location and a drought tolerance typical of all *Plumeria* species suggests its usefulness in xeriscape plantings.

Plumeria pudica seems to be resistant to the rust fungus that affects most other *Plumeria* species and hybrids and it is not prone to any other serious disease or insect pest problems.

Plot Locations within Fairchild: *Guaiacum sanctum*, Entrance to Corbin Building, Plot 139; *Plumeria pudica*, Visitor Center, Plot 41; *Neomarica caerulea*, Windows to the Tropics Conservatory, Plot 130

Neomarica caerulea
Family: Iridaceae
**Common Name: Apostle Plant,
Twelve Apostles, Walking Iris**

The captivating colors and enchanting fragrance of the flowers make *Neomarica caerulea* irresistible. This lovely Brazilian iris relative is surprisingly uncommon in South Florida landscape, even though it thrives in a variety of local growing conditions.

In the ground or as a potted plant, the sword-shaped leaves and iris-like flowers give a similar textural component to the landscape as do temperate irises. They appear from August through April, each flower lasting but a single day and replaced every few days by new blossoms.

Neomarica caerulea tolerates a wide range of soil and light conditions. The best specimens seem to be in moist, well-drained soil in locations with morning sun and some shade in the afternoon. Clumps may be divided but propagation from fresh seed is easy and fairly fast. Plants mature to flowering size from seed in less than a year. As for cold-hardiness, they will tolerate temperatures into the low 20°F range.