

## Tough Flowers for the Summer Landscape

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I love plants that can thrive with little or no special care through our brutal summers and look good at the same time. And I love telling others about such plants. Today I would like to introduce you to two such plants that I think have a lot of potential for use in local landscapes.

The first of these plants, the perennial peanut, is one that you may have heard about. But if you've heard about it, few of you in our area are actually using this plant yet. In fact, local nurseries report such low sales that they sometimes don't even stock this plant. I would like to change that situation.

I first saw the perennial peanut some 15 years ago at the University of Florida, in front of the horticultural sciences building, mixed in with the lawn. Its cheerful yellow blooms were low enough to not be mowed by a lawn mower if the mower was set on a high setting. Or if they were mowed, new blooms popped back out in no time.

The perennial peanut actually got its start as a forage plant for cattle. But, probably because of the University of Florida planting, some nursery growers in the state have tried promoting it as an ornamental groundcover. Some of the cultivars, such as Ecoturf, lend themselves particularly well to landscape use because of their lower growth habit.



After seeing a beautiful planting at the Wakulla Springs State Park entrance several years ago, I was even more convinced that the perennial peanut is a plant we should be using more in landscapes. Once established, it's very drought-tolerant, and it is perennial. It's one downside is that it dies back to the ground in the winter, so there's nothing to see then. However, it pops back out very reliably the following spring. We've incorporated perennial peanut plantings into several areas of our demonstration landscape at the UF-IFAS Extension office in Leon County at 615 Paul Russell Road. Our first planting was in a bed beside a sidewalk in back of the building, where it now gives a show of color all summer long. This summer we started plantings on the bank out front, where we hope it attracts lots of attention from passers-by as well as helps slow erosion on the bank.

Perennial peanut needs lots of sun to thrive and flower well. If you would like to try it, check with local nurseries. I prefer the lower-growing type. If what they have is too tall in the pot, more than ten inches or so, it's probably not one of the lower-growing cultivars. Try a pot or two of perennial peanuts this summer, and I think you'll soon be a fan, too.



The other plant I would like to tell you about doesn't have a common name that anyone would recognize. And most nurseries won't recognize its formal name, *Dicliptera suberecta*, either. It just hasn't caught on yet. Sue Watkins, a local gardening enthusiast and formal Tallahassee Nurseries employee who is responsible for bringing a lot of new plants to the Tallahassee area, introduced me to *Dicliptera* four to five years back when she gave me some small plants from her yard. I brought the tiny plants home, stuck them in a shaded spot behind my garage and forgot about them. Over the next four years, the scraggly plants developed into a nice groundcover of gray-green foliage. No flowers, just nice foliage. It hasn't popped up anywhere outside the area, indicating that it's not invasive. It just stays nicely confined to its bed, but it's gradually expanding its borders, even outside the irrigated area.

Then, several years later, Sue reminded me that *Dicliptera* has orange-red flowers when it's in full sun. So, I purchased a couple of the plants and put them in our demonstration garden, where they started growing and flowering immediately. Whereas, most plants we put in the garden require a few weeks of tender care to get them off to a healthy start, the *Dicliptera* jumped off to a great start despite being what I thought at the time was "underwatered" because of poor sprinkler head placement. Almost immediately the scraggly plants started bushing out and producing some flowers. As I already liked the plant with no flowers in the shade, because of its growth habit and gray-green foliage, now I was really sold. But I knew I would have to get a good photo of *Dicliptera* in a garden setting before I could really convince you to try it.

Then several weeks ago I saw the most striking pot of *Dicliptera*, in front of a restaurant, in the blazing sun of one of our northwest beach communities. I took plenty of photos, so see what you think.

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[\[Back\]](#)