

New Cleome Would Have Pleased Granny



Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: *Cleome* 'Linde Armstrong' is a compact, thornless form of *cleome*.

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This year, at our local garden club plant sale, I discovered a new type of *cleome*, a cultivar called 'Linde Armstrong'. Characteristic spider flowers in a pinkish-lavender color are held aloft by strong, purplish stems. Although it is a dwarf cultivar, and the leaves and flowers are much smaller than the species, it is unmistakably a member of the family. Three-lobed, palmate leaves give the plant a delicate look. It has quickly become one of my favorites.

Granny grew the traditional type of *Cleome* in her cottage garden in Mississippi. I remember it from my childhood. She called it spider flower. She shared her plants with me, and I planted them in my row of flowers at the head of the family vegetable garden. I remember cutting large bouquets of spider flowers and bringing them inside to decorate the top of the piano.

Cleome is a reseeding annual that blooms clusters of spidery flowers on sticky plants that grow four or five feet tall and wide. Showy flower heads six inches wide and loosely arranged have distinctive spidery "cat whisker" stamens. Underneath the flowers, long narrow seed pods form, and the plants grow taller and taller on their stems until, by summer's end, the flower is held on a seedy stem two or more feet long. All summer hummingbirds and butterflies claim their share of the nectar. Once you've smelled *Cleome*, you will always recognize it. I can't say that it smells good, but it is quite distinctive.

Several cultivars of *Cleome* are on the market now. 'Helen Campbell' is white, and the Queen series has flowers that are cherry, pink, rose, purple, mauve and ruby. The Sparkler series are dwarf bush forms with large flowers. And now, of course, 'Linde Armstrong' comes along with small flowers and thornless foliage.

I placed 'Linde Armstrong' in a container where I could view it up close. Combined with a large, purple-leafed *Alocasia* and gray licorice plant to trail over the edge, it has been spectacular all summer. I expected it to grow about 18 inches tall, because that is what most of the literature suggested. When I last measured, it was 30 inches tall and wide and still growing. So much for the literature.

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Cleome does best in full sun and fertile, well-drained soil. It is very heat and humidity tolerant. A sprinkling of slow-release fertilizer at the beginning of the summer and again about mid summer should keep *Cleome* growing happily until frost.

I wish Granny could see my new *Cleome*. I know that she would smile and say, “Well, I’ll swan!” as she clasped her hands together and raised them to her cheek in a gesture of surprise and delight. I know the feeling.

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