

## Building a Bog Garden



*Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: The native swamp hibiscus, *Hibiscus coccineus*, is one of the plants that can be used in a bog garden.*

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### Site Selection and Building

**B**og gardens are becoming increasingly popular. When choosing a spot for a bog garden, it is important to select a sunny and level area. Six to eight hours a day of unbroken, direct sunlight is needed. About the only exception to this would be for the Venus Fly Trap plant, which needs around ten hours a day. As with a pond, you should use rope or a garden hose to determine the exact size and shape you desire. It is similar to the old adage: measure twice, cut once. Try to only have to dig your hole once. If by chance you already have a low wet spot in your landscape that is in full sun, this could be a perfect area for moisture loving plants and bog gardens. A bog garden is quite easy to build as an independent feature or in combination with a water garden. The combination of the two can be quite striking in the landscape and provide a seemingly natural transition between land and water.

After you have selected your site and configuration for your garden, dig the hole to between twelve and fifteen inches deep. Keep the sides of the hole perpendicular to the bottom of the bog. Next, line the hole with EDM rubber liner. You need to pierce the liner every two feet, depending on configuration of your bog. Cover the bottom with two or three inches of pea gravel, then add heavy, rich good quality soil combined with an equal amount of peat or sphagnum. A bog garden needs as much well rotted organic matter as possible. Even in bog gardens where containers are used, the garden still needs to drain to prevent stagnation. This is also true for in-ground bogs. If you plan on using tall plants in your bog, such as flag iris, make sure your bog garden is

large enough that these plants do not shade the other marginal plants, especially if you are using carnivorous plants.

### **Plants**

There are a good many easy-care perennials to be used for bog gardens, deciduous and evergreen, native and ornamental. Sweet Flag (*Acorus calamus*) is two to three feet tall and mostly seen in yellow/green or white/green variegated forms. Flag Iris (*Iris ensata*) reaches three to four 3-4 feet and seen primarily in blue and yellow. You need to watch the spread of this plant because the stand can become quite large. Another great iris is the Japanese Iris (*Iris japonica*) that is a little shorter than the flag iris. The flowers range from white to pink to purple. Golden Creeping Jenny and Variegated Creeping Jenny (*Lysimachia spp.*) are very good groundcovers. Both species are primarily chartreuse green with yellow flowers. Horse Tail (*Equisetum hyemale*) is a reed-like plant that gets three feet tall with jointed evergreen stems. Be careful, as this plant can be invasive. The Native Yellow Water Canna (*Canna glauca*) is four to five tall with bright yellow flowers held high above light green foliage. Swamp Hibiscus (*Hibiscus coccineus*), another native plant can reach eight feet with scarlet red five-petalled flowers with intricately cut leaves. Cardinal Flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*), a reliable perennial, sends spikes of intense red flowers with either burgundy or green foliage.

**Carnivorous Plants:** Of the one-quarter of a million species of flowering plants on the earth, about 600 are carnivorous or meat-eating. Most plants are subtle in their means of entrapping animal prey. The attraction, trapping, and means of digestion vary from species to species. The one similarity they all share is that their trapping devices and digestive organs are modified leaves. Some species of carnivorous plants are in danger of extinction, mainly due to our reclamation of natural wetlands for development. These plants are unusual but beautiful and with the growing interest in this form of gardening, becoming more and more available.

**Pitcher Plants ( *Sarracenia spp.*)** species are especially dramatic. They range in height from six to twenty-four inches, consisting of an erect pitcher that is hooded. The red/purple veins that run through the plants give each species a unique characteristic, ranging from a deeply veined red hood to lacey, mottled look. In spring the three-inch flowers range from chartreuse green to lemon yellow to burgundy red. They have modified leaves that form hollow vessels, referred to as pitchers, which capture the prey. Pitcher Plants are native to North America, found in bogs, swamps, low wetlands, open pinelands, and sometimes in wooded areas.

Some people call Sundews (*Drosera spp.*) living flypaper. Their leaves are covered with tentacles, which terminate in a ball of sticky mucilage. The glistening of their mucilage suggests the common name. Insects are trapped when they light on the leaf and become entangled in the sticky mucilage. As the insect attempts to pull free, it frequently pulls over or accidentally touches other hairs, becoming hopelessly mired.

**Venus Fly Trap (*Dionaea muscipula*)** The blade portion of each leaf is modified into a trap, by which the plant captures its prey. The trap is activated by touching trigger hairs. Once prey has been captured, the trap will remain closed for one to two weeks, then reopen in a day. Although the plant does not need prey for survival, it has been shown that the plants that receive prey are healthier and produce more seed.

### **Planting and Care**

When planting, place taller plants to the north, and smaller plants closer to the viewing area. As long as smaller types do not get too much shading, they can be planted between the taller types. Accents such as stones, pools, or even branches can add appeal. Avoid salt-water accents, as they often contain harmful minerals. Do not use limestone or basic rocks. Constant saturation is not needed, but the soil mixture should not dry out. An important note is that if you are using carnivorous plants in your garden, use only rainwater or distilled water for irrigation, as city water is often full of minerals that are not beneficial to this class of plants. Do not fertilize. Feeding insects to carnivorous plants is not necessary when they are planted outdoors.

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