

Passion Vine Brings Home the Butterflies



Photo by Marie Harrison: Passion vine is an important larval food plant for several butterflies and is, therefore, a good plant for butterfly gardens. It does spread rampantly, however, so plant it in an area where you won't mind it popping up everywhere.

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Amiable Spouse spends considerable time each year grumbling about having to pull passion flower vines out of beds, the lawn, and other places where it has sprung up many yards from where I planted it. He cautioned me about it pretty strongly. “Over my dead body!” were his words, as best I remember. Well, I planted it, but not just the way he asked me to.

Passion vine (*Passiflora incarnata*) is a common weedy vine that I remember from the cotton fields back home. We called it maypop, and Amiable Spouse believes that is because it “may pop” up anywhere. Many times we Bullock children rested on our cotton sacks while we enjoyed eating maypops.

There is a technique to eating the fruit that must be followed in order to get the fullest measure of flavor. Wait until it is fully ripe and actually falls off the plant before eating it. Pop it open and put several of the fleshy seeds in your mouth. Crush them just a bit, swallow the juice, and spit out the seeds. Surely, only country folks know that trick! City slickers are so deprived of simple pleasures!

Passion flower is a deciduous perennial vine that is a common roadside weed in much of the Southeastern United States. To grow it in your garden, place it where it can scramble up a trellis or over shrubs or up tree trunks. Plant passion vine in full to part sun and give it plenty of room. It adapts well to most well-drained soils, so adding soil amendments is not necessary.

Care of the passion vine is not complicated, but sometimes it can be challenging. Prune the dead stalks to the ground after the frost has killed them. Remove unwanted sprouts that may pop up at unsuspected places. If fertilizer is applied, use a light hand. Excess fertilizer will encourage lush green leaves at the expense of

flowers.

Maypop is a necessary plant for a butterfly garden. The gulf fritillary, zebra heliconia, and checkered fritillary butterflies lay their eggs on the leaves. After the eggs hatch out, caterpillars eat the leaves, leaving the plant quite ragged. I allow it to grow up through my sweetshrub at the side of the house. The tattered leaves are less conspicuous, but I am able to enjoy the beautiful fringed blossoms and fruits.

Passion vines are easily started from cuttings. Take tip cuttings in summer when the vine is mature and place them in damp soil. Layering is easily accomplished by scarring the bottom of a vine, covering it with soil, and weighing it down with a brick or rock. Seeds may be planted, but they may take up to a year to germinate.

Since *Passiflora incarnata* sends up new plants yards away from where it was planted, getting new plants is as easy as pulling up the unwanted sprouts and putting them in containers. These sprouts have a better survival rate if part of the root is attached to it, but you must dig down a bit. Just pulling the sprout will detach it from its root.

About 500 species of passionflowers have been identified, many of which are native to South America . *Passiflora caerulea* (blue passionflower) is hardy in much of the South. 'Constance Elliott' is a beautiful white cultivar of this species. The red passionflower (*P. racemosa*) is not winter hardy in areas with freezing winter temperatures. Florida has its own native passion flowers, including *Passiflora incarnata*, *P. lutea*, *P. multiflora*, *P. pallens*, *P. sexflora*, and *P. suberosa*.

Several medicinal properties have been attributed to passion vine. It has been used as a narcotic and tranquilizer to treat tension, fatigue, insomnia, muscle spasms, and hyperactivity. Although it has been used for medicinal purposes in Europe for many years, it is not recognized as safe or effective in the United States .

Plant a passion vine in your yard, unless, of course, someone in the household objects adamantly. Plant it for the butterflies. Plant it for yourself. Plant it---just because.

At a Glance

Passiflora incarnata

Say: (pass-eh-FLOOR-ah in-car-NAY-tuh)

Family: Passifloraceae (Passion Flower Family)

Other names: Passion Vine, Maypop

Origin: SE United States

Zones: 6-9

Light: Sun, Part Sun

Water Use Zone: Low

Size: 8'-15'

Soil: Well-drained

Salt tolerance: Slight