

Beautiful

Beautiful 'Flowering Maple' delicate and tough



Photo by Bob Douglas Master Gardener volunteer with UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: Abutilon 'Marion Stewart' is well adapted to North Florida .

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Uh-bew-ta-what ? I can still hear myself at my first master gardener conference feeling totally inadequate at yet another theoretically wonderful plant that I had zero knowledge of and couldn't even pronounce. Back home, I carefully settled the tiny plant I had been given into a partial sun/shade situation, never even thinking it might not make it through the winter. The plant began going downhill almost immediately, but I nursed it and talked to it and after a year of pretty much no response, I looked out the window one cold November day and there were leaves and a flower.

The maple-like leaves had yellow flecks on a background of green and the flower was a five-petaled salmon colored bell. I was thrilled! But not half as thrilled as when my *Abutilon pictum* 'Thompsonii' grew into a three-foot tall by two-foot wide shrub covered with coral bells all winter long!

Garden beauties

Abutilon are tender about frosty temperatures, but otherwise tough, belying their delicate beauty. They have handsome, medium green, sometimes variegated foliage resembling maple leaves. The blossoms are gorgeous in their bell or saucer shapes and in the color of the calyx, petals and anthers.

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Here in North Florida the flowering maples flower most commonly in spring and fall, but the hybrids in particular may bloom in winter and summer if protected from extremes of temperature. The small- and medium-sized plants such as the 'Belle' hybrids lend themselves well to an indoor container culture (hence the Victorian designation, parlor maple). They prefer a nice, light parlor - 70 degrees daytime and 60 to 65 degrees at night.

Hang 'em high

Outside they grow well in hanging baskets which are hung high so that one can look up into the drooping blossoms. *Lysimachia nummularia* 'aurea' (Moneywort) makes a striking companion as it flows down the sides of the pot. A similar look can be achieved in a large high pot sitting on a porch instead of in the parlor.

Beware the frost

Hardiness varies with species, generally zones 8 and 9. Experiment in your own microclimate, as most of the abutilons available in this area are fine to 40 degrees and even into the 30s, some right down to a light frost. Mulch them heavily and keep the soil wet before a freeze. Protection against the cold exists also in the pruning culture: abutilons should not be pruned until spring.

Quite hardy here is *Abutilon hybridum* 'Marion Stewart,' a small tree form that sports 1.5-inch wide orange bells with dramatic red veining. It is more sun tolerant and needs pruning for bushiness. It may grow to six feet. Another beauty is *Abutilon megapotamicum* with its pendulous bright yellow petals emerging from a large red calyx and purple anthers hanging down past the blossom; the leaves and stems are longer than usual and the plant has a more prostrate growth habit. Check out all the varieties at your local nurseries.

Abutilon

Pronunciation: a-BEW-tih-lon

Family: Malvaceae

Common names: Flowering Maple, Parlor Maple, Chinese Lantern

Leaves: Alternate trifoliate, resembling maple leaves

Flowers: Bell or saucer shapes, color range from yellow and red to orange, pink, ivory, and white

Growth habit and size: Upright, shrublike; from inches to 6-feet high

Origin: Native to Brazil, India and other parts of Asia

Culture: Partial sun/shade, rich, well-drained soil, average watering

Propagation: Easy: seeds, cuttings

Hardiness zone: 8-9

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