

Choose a Bevy of Buttonflowers for Summer-Long Color



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A couple of years ago District I of the Florida Federation of Garden Clubs held a plant exchange. Each participant was invited to bring a plant and exchange it for one they didn't have. We were all excited about the prospect of acquiring a new plant.

I don't remember what I took to the exchange, but I still have what I brought home. The plant I selected had simple, oval-shaped leaves about one and a half inches wide and three inches long. Serrated (sawlike) leaf edges decorated the olive to light green foliage. Most importantly, I did not recognize it, and it was labeled simply "buttonflower."

That was all the incentive I needed for selecting that particular plant. I brought the interesting little temptress home and found a likely spot for it in my garden. There it commenced to grow, and during the course of the summer it attained a height of about a foot and a spread of about two feet. From June until frost it was covered with pretty, one-inch, buttonlike lavender flowers. Its fine texture and massed, spreading form added a softness to my flower beds and a pleasing contrast to the sharp spikes of nearby plants.

I have since learned that the plant is named Brazilian buttonflower (*Centratherum intermedium*). Native to Brazil, buttonflower is a herbaceous perennial in USDA Zones 9 - 11. Here in the coastal South, it is a tender perennial that we grow like an annual because it cannot withstand our winter temperatures.

Even so, it has been fruitful and multiplied, for it sets seeds prolifically. Each spring, these seedlings spring up as thick as hair on a dog's back, and thinning is necessary for optimal growth. These thinnings are potted up and shared with friends or offered at plant sales.

Buttonflower is effective as a ground cover, edging, or cascading down a wall or planter. I like it best massed at the front of a border where its softness and refined character may be best appreciated. Plant it in full sun to partial shade and in well-drained soil. It is drought tolerant once established, and no pests or diseases are of

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major concern.

Combine this soft, fine-textured beauty with plants that have spiky foliage, such as grasses or African iris. In front of dramatic plants like purple-leafed cannas, they provide a soft transition from the ground to the high-flung giant canna's leaves. They combine beautifully with yellow lantanas, and are stunning displayed against the oranges and golds of cigar plant, butterfly weed, and cosmos.

Buttonflowers may be a bit difficult to find unless you have a friend who can share it with you. However, once you have it, it will always be present. It's another of those reseeding annuals that, although they reseed prolifically, unwanted plants are easily removed.

On this very day, buttonflower is blooming out by the street where I once placed plant debris for city crews to pick up. One year, I cut the buttonflower that had been killed by frost and placed it by the curb. The crews picked it up, but the next year, seedlings came up and flourished. Needless to say, the sprinkler system does not reach that far, and the soil was not amended. Buttonflower doesn't mind. It never misses a lick. From spring until frost it decorates that area. What a stouthearted little soldier!

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