
Wildflower Spot – August 2008

John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

PASSIONFLOWER VINE

Passiflora incarnata

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Two species of this tropical-looking flower are native to Virginia, growing in most counties in the coastal and piedmont regions. The large lavender flowers are arranged in intricate layers, fringed in the center. Leaves are toothed along the edges and 3-lobed. Emerging late in the spring, passionflower vine grows and blooms rampantly all summer, then often disappears in October and November under the voracious grazing of the caterpillars of the fritillary butterflies.



Tendrils permit climbing up a tree or on a fence, but it is often found sprawling along the ground where it blooms just as passionately. In a controlled garden or flower bed, passionflower vine should be planted in a large container, sunk into the ground.

Passionflower vine grows in fields, pine woods and fencerows in southeastern U.S. and Bermuda and west to Oklahoma and Texas. Any soil will do, rich is preferred. Full sun produces more flowers, drainage can be moist to dry. The plant has deep roots and will colonize to form groundcover.

Passiflora lutea, also native to Virginia, is not quite as showy, with smaller yellow flowers and a small black berry as fruit. Native passionflower vine is often sold in local nurseries, but be careful, the leaves of non-native passionflower vines have more than 3 lobes.

The passionflowers were discovered by a Roman Catholic friar in Mexico in the early 1600's. Symbolism to the Christian passion abounds. The combined sepals and petals could represent 10 apostles (omitting Peter

who denied, and Judas who betrayed), the five anthers = the five wounds, the column of the ovary = the cross, the stamens = the hammers, the three stigmas = the three nails.

However, American Indians already used the plant in folk medicine and as an aphrodisiac, attaching a different meaning to the plant's name. Chemists have found drugs in passionflower

used to combat insomnia and anxiety. A writer in southern Appalachia advises: "After you have lived with someone for many years the little things they do start to bother you. So you take some passionflower leaves and make you a tea. Pretty soon you start to relax and the little things don't bother you so much and you get along fine."

The fruit is greenish-yellow, edible and makes a very good jelly. In 1612 Captain Smith reported that in Virginia the Indians planted a wild fruit like a lemon, which begins to ripen in September. Passionflower is also known as "maypop", referring to the sound the fruit makes when stepped upon. It is the official state wildflower of Tennessee.

The flowers are visited by butterflies such as the variegated fritillary and zebra longwing, who lay eggs on the stems and leaves permitting the entire lifecycle of these beautiful butterflies. Hummingbirds and bees also visit the flowers, but beware, deer and rabbits may eat the fruit. ❖

Photo: Passionflower vine (*Passiflora incarnata*) taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.