

Jewels, September 2007 - **Rubiaceae**

Rubiaceae is a family that includes two of the most common landscape plants in Florida, *Ixora* and *Pentas lanceolata* (star clusters). Their relative the *Gardenia* is also commonly grown. All 3 are highly recommended for specific uses – *Pentas* for butterfly gardens, *Ixora* for easy summer color and *Gardenia* for fragrance. Several other plants in the family **Rubiaceae** are no fussier about care than *Ixora* or *Pentas*, but unfortunately not seen so often in local gardens. These include *Coffea arabica*, *Psychotria nervosa*, and *Mussaenda erythrophylla*.



Wild coffee (*Psychotria nervosa*) is a Florida and Caribbean native that grows in sun or shade. Its appearance is similar to its close relative, coffee, described below. The flowers attract butterflies and the fruit is eaten by birds. It will grow in all types of soils and is fairly drought tolerant. Its maximum size is about 10' high by 8' wide, much smaller in full sun. All in all, it makes an excellent addition to a native or butterfly garden.

Coffee (*Coffea arabica*) is a shade-loving shrub or small tree which also tolerates sun. Its glossy, dark green leaves are very attractive, and so are the red berries, which give us the beans that make up such an important part of every American breakfast! Coffee likes lots of rain, so if we're going through a dry spell, it will definitely need regular irrigation. The flowers are fragrant and continue to bloom after the first beans are produced. At any one time there are green, orange, and red berries on the bush, so it puts on quite a show.



Of course I've saved the best for last. *Mussaenda erythrophylla* is a spectacular shrub which grows very well from Tampa Bay southward, but is not often seen in local nurseries. Recently, however, I saw some at Home Depot, so I thought it was time to write about it. A shrub with too many common names to list, reaching 6 to 10 feet tall, *Mussaenda* likes full sun and moderate water. With occasional low-nitrogen fertilizer it blooms repeatedly throughout the year, and can be quite literally covered with blooms.

