

Mussaenda philippica

Family: Rubiaceae



Pine Island, Florida, early August

Mussaenda; tropical dogwood; Buddah's lamp

Origin: The Philippines

U.S.D.A. Zone: 10a-12

Plant Type: Shrub or small tree

Growth Rate: Fast

Light requirements: Full sun; partial shade

Flower color: Salmon; white

Flowering Months: Spring through fall

Leaf Persistence: Deciduous

Soil Salt Tolerance: Medium

Drought Tolerance: Low

Soil Requirements: Fertile; sandy; humus-rich;
well-drained

Nutritional Requirements: Moderate

Major Pests: None

Typical Dimensions: 9 x 10 feet

Propagation: Soft or semi-hardwood cuttings;
rarely from seeds

Human Hazards: Hairs on leaves and/or stems
can cause skin irritation

Uses: Specimen plant; standard; patio; container



M. philippica 'Dona Aurorae', Sunrise, Florida, June

National Geographic Distribution

Mussaendas are members of the *Rubiaceae* (Madder, or coffee family) and are native to West Africa through the Indian sub-continent, Southeast Asia and into southern China. There are more than 200 known species of *Mussaenda*, of which about ten are found in cultivation and three are widely used in cultivation. *Mussaenda philippica* is native to the Philippines. The cultivar 'Dona Aurorae' is perhaps the most commonly grown. It has white sepals with yellow flowers.

Growth Habit

Mussaenda is an open, somewhat rambling shrub that can reach 15 feet in height, depending upon the species. It tends to develop a quirky trunk and an awkward crown. In the wild, some can climb 30 feet into surrounding trees, though in cultivation they rarely reach that size.



Sunrise, Florida, mid-June



Fort Myers Beach, Florida, early September



Quirky trunk, Grenada, Eastern Caribbean, late May



Black River, Jamaica, late May

Leaves, Flowers and Fruits

The leaves are opposite, bright to dark green and elliptical to ovate in shape. The 4 to 6 inch leaves are often pubescent (covered with short, fine hairs) and prominently veined. The flowers are produced in terminal clusters. They are small and are composed of five fused petals that form a tubular orange-yellow corolla and have five greatly enlarged sepals. The sepals are leaf-like and are commonly mistaken for bracts. They are the principal ornamental feature of the plant and hang in masses just below the tubular corolla and above the leaves. The sepals persist long after the corollas have fallen. The fruit is a small (to 3/4"), fleshy, somewhat elongated berry containing many seeds, which are rarely seen in South Florida conditions.



Davie, Florida, mid-June



Leaf: 5.5"x2.75"

Sepal: Not measured

Corolla: 1.3" long

Flowering

In Southwest Florida, the plant flowers generally from May into November. It begins flowering as soon as it is warm enough to produce growth and new leaves. There are approximately 184 intense blooming days meaning on average 50% or more of the plant is covered with showy sepals for that many days during the year.



Sepals and tubular corolla



Sepals and tubular corollas

Planting and Maintenance Guidelines

Mussaenda is most suited for the warmest areas of South Florida. In climates where temperatures rarely fall below 60°F, Mussaenda is evergreen and will flower year-round. From 55-60°F, plant growth slows. Below 38°F Mussaendas will be damaged, with loss of leaves, sepals, and flowers. If temperatures persist for several hours in the high 30's stems can be damaged. In Southeast Florida winter damage is commonly limited to leaf drop, with some stem die-back. In Southwest Florida, winter damage is more extensive and often involves stem die-back. During late winter, prune out any dead wood. At other times, prune as needed to make a bushy plant and to encourage new growth and sepals. However, it is not well suited to close cropping. Nonetheless, Mussaendas can stand heavy pruning and if it becomes necessary, it should be done during late winter or spring. Once leaves have fallen the plant will not re-leaf until March or April followed shortly thereafter by its long flowering period.

The plant requires full sun to produce abundant sepals but some afternoon shade can be beneficial. Mussaendas can suffer nutritional deficiencies on high pH soils. They are not drought tolerant and will benefit from regular irrigation during the dry months. Enriching the growing site with organic material helps to conserve soil moisture and provide nutrients to the plant. Remove faded flowers and sepals to prevent possible fungal infection. Plants can be trained to become small trees. However, more commonly it is kept at a height between 5 and 7 feet tall. Mussaendas are relatively pest and disease free although scale, mealybugs and mites are sometimes a problem. The pink hibiscus mealybug and the lobate lac scale can infest a multitude of plants including Mussaendas.

References

- Courtright, Gordon. 1988. *Tropicals*. Timber Press, Portland, Oregon.
- Rogers, Dr. George K. 2009. *Landscape Plants for South Florida*. Palm Beach Community College, Palm Beach Gardens, Florida
- McLaughlin, Garofalo, Joe. [Mussaendas for South Florida](#). UF/IFAS, Miami-Dade Extension, Homestead, Florida

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