

# Hollywood lignumvitae

(*Guaiacum sanctum*)

For definitions of botanical terms, visit [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary\\_of\\_botanical\\_terms](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_botanical_terms).

Hollywood lignumvitae is a beautiful and fascinating plant whose range is limited in the U.S. to the southern tip of Florida, but extends throughout tropical America from the West Indies to Mexico, Central America and northern South America. A very slow-growing species, it has been historically prized for its extremely dense, self-lubricating wood, which was used for making bowling balls, gavels and ships' propeller shafts. There are also records of it being used medicinally to treat syphilis. Due to over harvesting throughout much of its range, it has been extirpated from some areas and is listed as near threatened by the IUCN. In Florida, it is listed as state endangered, with the most intact natural population existing at Lignumvitae Key Botanical State Park in the Keys, which is only accessible by boat.



Photo by Andrew Kearns, taken at the Jose Marti MAST Native Arboretum

The plant's very showy bluish-purple flowers emerge in terminal clusters. Individual flowers are around 1 inch across and have five twisted spoon-shaped petals. Fruits are orange-yellow fleshy winged capsules that split open to expose black seeds with red arils. Leaves are oval shaped, opposite and even-pinnately compound made up of 3-5 pairs of leaflets. Its bark is creamy white to grey and scaly, and will peel in patches with age.

Fortunately, Hollywood lignumvitae is available from nurseries that specialize in Florida native plants as it can provide great wildlife value in the home landscape. It is a larval host for the Lyside sulphur butterfly (*Kricogonia lyside*) and provides a nectar source for bees and other butterfly species. The seeds also attract and provide food for birds.

**Family:** Zygophyllaceae (Creosote-bush Family)

**Native range:** Miami-Dade and Monroe counties

To see where natural populations of Hollywood lignumvitae have been vouchered, visit [www.florida.plantatlas.usf.edu](http://www.florida.plantatlas.usf.edu).

**Hardiness:** Zones 10B-11

**Lifespan:** Perennial

**Soil:** Moist to dry, well-drained limestone soils, with organic top layer

**Exposure:** Full sun

**Growth habit:** Small tree to large spreading shrub up to 30 feet tall

**Propagation:** Seed

**Garden tips:** Hollywood lignumvitae is an ideal specimen shrub or small tree in a sunny spot. While very slow growing, once established it is very drought tolerant and will not require supplemental watering.

Plants are available from nurseries that specialize in Florida native plants. Visit [www.PlantRealFlorida.org](http://www.PlantRealFlorida.org) to find a nursery in your area.



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Florida Wildflower Foundation • P O Box 941691, Maitland, FL 32794-1691 • 407-622-1606 • [www.FlaWildflowers.org](http://www.FlaWildflowers.org)

