

Wild petunia

(*Ruellia caroliniensis*)

For definitions of botanical terms, visit en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_botanical_terms.

Wild petunia is a long-lived perennial wildflower found in moist to wet hammocks, flatwoods and sandhills, and along roadsides and in disturbed sites. It typically blooms in late spring through early fall. The lavender corollas attract a variety of bees, including bumble, leafcutter and honey bees. Several butterfly species, including the Malachite and Mangrove buckeye gather nectar from the flowers. It is also a host plant for the White peacock butterfly.



Photo by Emily Bell

Flowers are five-petaled, funnel-shaped and grows to about 2 inches in diameter. They may be purple, lavender or pale pinkish-white and are born in clusters along multibranched stems. Leaves are green, simple and ovate to elliptic with opposite arrangement. The leaves and stems are covered with fine hairs. Like other members of the Acanthaceae family, Wild petunia's mature seed capsules will explode open, sending seeds far from the parent plant. The plant has many growth habits, from prostrate to erect with short or long internodes.

Although the common name is "petunia," the flowers in the *Ruellia* genus are not true petunias, which are members of the Solanaceae (nightshade) family.

Family: Acanthaceae (Acanthus family)

Native range: Nearly throughout

To see where natural populations of Wild petunia have been vouchered, visit www.florida.plantatlas.usf.edu.

Lifespan: Perennial

Soil: Dry to moist, well-drained sandy soils; has been known to grow in wet, mucky soils

Exposure: Full sun to fairly dense shade

Growth habit: 6–18" tall

Propagation: Seed, cuttings

Florida regions of landscape suitability: North, Central, South

Garden tips: Wild petunia is easy to grow and incredibly adaptable to a variety of conditions. It is also a prolific self-seeder. It does well in a mixed wildflower bed of plants and grasses. Its showy flowers last only a day, but successive blooms keep the plant looking fresh. Establishing Wild petunia in shadier locations will result in plants that appear lanky with fewer blooms. In North Florida, it is not recommended for mass plantings, as it will die back in the winter, leaving a patch of stems.

Caution: The widely grown Mexican petunia (*Ruellia simplex*, synonyms *R. brittoniana* and *R. tweediana*) should be avoided as it reproduces via underground rhizomes and does not respond well to herbicides. A Category I invasive species, it has spread into municipal and natural areas, displacing native species and changing community structures or ecological functions.

Wild petunia is often available at nurseries that specialize in Florida native plants. Visit www.PlantRealFlorida.org to find a nursery in your area.

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