

Alternative Shrubs for the Ficus Hedge with a Firebush Emphasis

Mike Malloy and Doug Caldwell



Top: Expansive, street-long hedges of Ficus benjamina are a common site in old Naples. Left, Ficus roots become very aggressive and can damage foundations and sidewalks. Right, Firebush (Hamelia patens var. glabra) flowers all year and makes an excellent hedge. Photo(2), Mike Malloy and Doug Caldwell (top).

The right plant in the right place is one of the key components for a beautiful garden or landscape. The right plant in the right place will also reduce maintenance in terms of time and money. Many beautiful plants are put aside or overlooked in south Florida in favor of the inexpensive and quick fix with weeping ficus (*Ficus benjamina*). Although weeping ficus is the “play dough” of shrubbery species because it tolerates frequent shearing to keep it at the same height for twenty years and is sheared into all kinds of topiary such as arches and elephants, etc. Selection of this plant may just turn out to be the more costly to maintain than you may have planned. Besides the shearing costs there may be hardscape or structural problems as ficus roots will crack sidewalks, foundations, driveways, heave pavers, and can destroy irrigation and pool plumbing to name a few inherent problems. It also has to be maintained frequently (keeping it in a **boxed shape**) because otherwise it will grow to 80 feet. Let’s not forget the recent arrival (2006 or so) of a new thrips which distorts the leaves into a pea pod and then they defoliate. We also have another pest we will be contending with the ficus whitefly. This whitefly has been in the Homestead and Miami areas, but we have a confirmed infestation on the west coast in Alva (east of Ft. Myers). These all add to the upkeep or replacement of your “inexpensive” hedge.



Our state butterfly, the zebra longwing, collects pollen from a native firebush (Hamelia patens). Note the large leaves and red flowers. Photo, D. Caldwell

So when choosing a plant for a hedge take your time, take into consideration height and width at time of maturity of the plant you choose. Also think about attracting wildlife to your yard at the same time. Ficus will attract many different kinds of insects that will have to be sprayed to maintain its density and green, boring shiny leaves. Some of the alternative plants listed below will attract butterflies and birds making the landscape more interesting and environmentally friendly, that is “Florida Friendly”. Using a more Florida Friendly plant and not trimming it within an inch of its life every other week, will reduce your maintenance costs, allow for more flower production and produce a much healthier hedge, in return you will probably fertilize less and use fewer pesticides. You can use the money that you save on maintaining your towering ficus hedge to further the enhancement of your property.

Here are a few of our favorite alternatives:

Firebush (*Hamelia patens* var. *glabra*). The *glabra* and some of the other types are the “must have” for attracting zebra longwings and hummingbirds. But study the different types of firebush before purchasing! Firebush var. *glabra* will grow from eight to twelve feet and blooms all year long. It is also very drought and pruning tolerant. When using firebush **stay away from the presumed native (*Hamelia patens*)**; unless you don't mind a hedge which goes semi-deciduous (partial to complete defoliation) in the winter. It has lighter green and larger leaves (4 to 8 inches long) and redder flowers than the non-native firebrush (*Hamelia patens* var. *glabra*).



Three types of firebush, picture taken after some cold spells in February: A-African Red; B- Naples Butterfly (Thomas Hecker's cross of *H. patens* and *H. cuprea*); C- 'Firefly'. Photo, D. Caldwell. Extension

The undersides of the leaves have a slightly fuzzy feel to them even though the very fine hairs are not readily visible. *H. patens* will also grow into a 15 to 20 ft, weak-wooded tree, which if exposed to a 25 MPH wind, will have almost every branch broken. Remember these characteristics as plants are frequently unlabelled or mislabeled. **The *glabra* variety has orangey flowers and is evergreen** (unless we have a severe cold spell) and is supposedly from southern Mexico, Central America and northern South America regions. There are some varieties called 'African', 'Dwarf' or 'Compacta' but these usually grow more than three or four feet. Buyer beware! The dwarf moniker came about because the leaves are smaller, such as one called, 'Firefly' and 'Calusa', which reportedly stays around three or four feet. Aphids may be an occasional problem on firebush, but they can be trimmed off and do not cause lasting damage.



Croton scale on firebush stems. Photo by Stephen Brown, Lee County Extension UF/IFAS.

A new scale arrived in 2008, referred to as the croton scale, and has been reported on firebush and gumbo limbo in Lee County. Note the golden-green bumps which are the scale insects, on the twigs with the fruit.

Copperleaf. (*Acalypha* spp.) This plant is not known for its blooms but for its varieties of multi brightly colored foliage, gives year round color.

Fiddlewood (*Citharexylum fruticosum*) will grow six to twelve feet. It blooms in spring and summer and is fragrant. Seeds may sprout more than you'd like.

Jamaican caper (*Capparis cynophallophora*) grows six to fifteen feet tall and wide with showy white and pink flowers and tolerates drought. Ornamental red fruit peek outside the open seed pods.

Texas sage (*Leucophyllum frutescens*) will grow two to four feet and has lavender-blue flowers with silver foliage. Drought tolerant.

Thryallis (*Galphimia gracilis*) will grow four to six feet and will bloom all summer. It also will take the summer's intense heat. Not a thick hedge, however.

Most of the above plants are very drought tolerant and are wildlife friendly attracting a variety of butterflies, birds and other beneficial insects. For more shrub ideas see: Native Shrubs for South Florida, <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/EH159> and Low Maintenance Landscape Plants for South Florida, <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/EP107> and Shrubs Recommended for Perimeter Plantings, www.broward.org/extension/pdf/pipolygransonshrubs.pdf .

Some other plants to consider (do your homework, as some are not cold hardy, east of Interstate 75): allspice (*Pimento dioica*); bamboo (Wamin Buddha's belly or graceful); cocoplum; Japanese blueberry (*Elaeocarpus decipiens*); mirrorleaf viburnum (*Viburnum odoratissimum* 'Awabuki'); myrsine (*Myrsine floridana*-prefers some shade); necklace pod (*Sophora tomentosa*); pitch apple (*Clusia* spp. - cold sensitive); *Podocarpus gracilor*; seagrape (*Coccoloba uvifera*- cold sensitive); Simpson's stopper (*Myrcianthes fragrans*); and even the use of vines on supports as a screen. This list will continue to grow, especially when the fig whitefly arrives and we will need alternatives to ficus hedges. Please send us your success stories! Our e-mails are listed at the bottom of this page.

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