

LOVELY TO LOOK AT

by Frederick B. Essig

Quesnelia testudo is one of the most rugged and spectacular bromeliads found in Florida landscapes. This native of Brazil is the ideal representative of the pineapple family to use in areas where winter temperatures occasionally fall below freezing, where that distinctive "look" of the bromeliad is needed to create a tropical accent, and where a splash of bright color is needed in mid-winter.

Well, it's almost ideal. Like many bromeliads, and in fact like the always popular rose, *Quesnelia* has thorns, or more properly, sharp teeth that run up and down the sides of the long, strap-shaped



photo by Frederick B. Essig

A bed of *Quesnelia testudo* sends up brilliant spikes in late January and February.

leaves. One needs a suit of armor to safely enter a bed of these plants for weeding or pruning. Brer Rabbit's Florida cousins would be as safe here as in his legendary briar patch.

Is it worth it? Well, the world has not abandoned roses, and thousands of Floridians have embraced (not too closely!) the bromeliad family. *Quesnelia testudo* is particularly attractive because of its cold-hardiness and drought-resistance, its ability to grow equally well in the ground and up the side of a tree, and for its habit of sending up brilliantly colored bloom spikes in January and February. The

club-shaped spikes are composed of rose-pink bracts that outlive by weeks the small blue-violet flowers nestled within them. A large bed of these plants will send up their blossoms all at the same time, creating color in the yard when little else is blooming.

Why the bright reddish color in mid-winter? Red is a color that can be seen by birds and it's an advertisement to them that nectar is hidden within - their own private supply. Most insects can only see in the yellow, blue, and violet end of the spectrum. (Bees can actually "see" ultraviolet, but that's another story).

Now, besides the busloads of Brazilian school kids in bright T-shirts that always seem to get in line just in front of you at Disney World, what other tourists do we have in Florida in the wintertime? Hummingbirds, you say? Bingo. Just as we look for the familiar



photo by Frederick B. Essig

This beauty makes its "point" equally well on the ground or up a tree.



Inconspicuous flowers nestle within the eye-catching bract.

golden arches when we're on a long road trip (admit it!), hummingbirds from South America are surely delighted to find these fast-food restaurants from "back home," as they follow the spring up to their summer feeding grounds in the northeast.

So invest in armor and give yourself and the hummingbirds a treat next January. If you can't find *Quesnelia testudo* in a nursery or at one of the plant festivals around the state, just drive around any suburban neighborhood in late January or February. You're

bound to see some, and most homeowners will be happy to share some of their surplus with you.

Dr. Essig is an Associate Professor of Biology at USF in Tampa. He wrote about calla, Easter, and other lilies in the Feb/Mar and Apr/May 2001 issues of Florida Gardening.

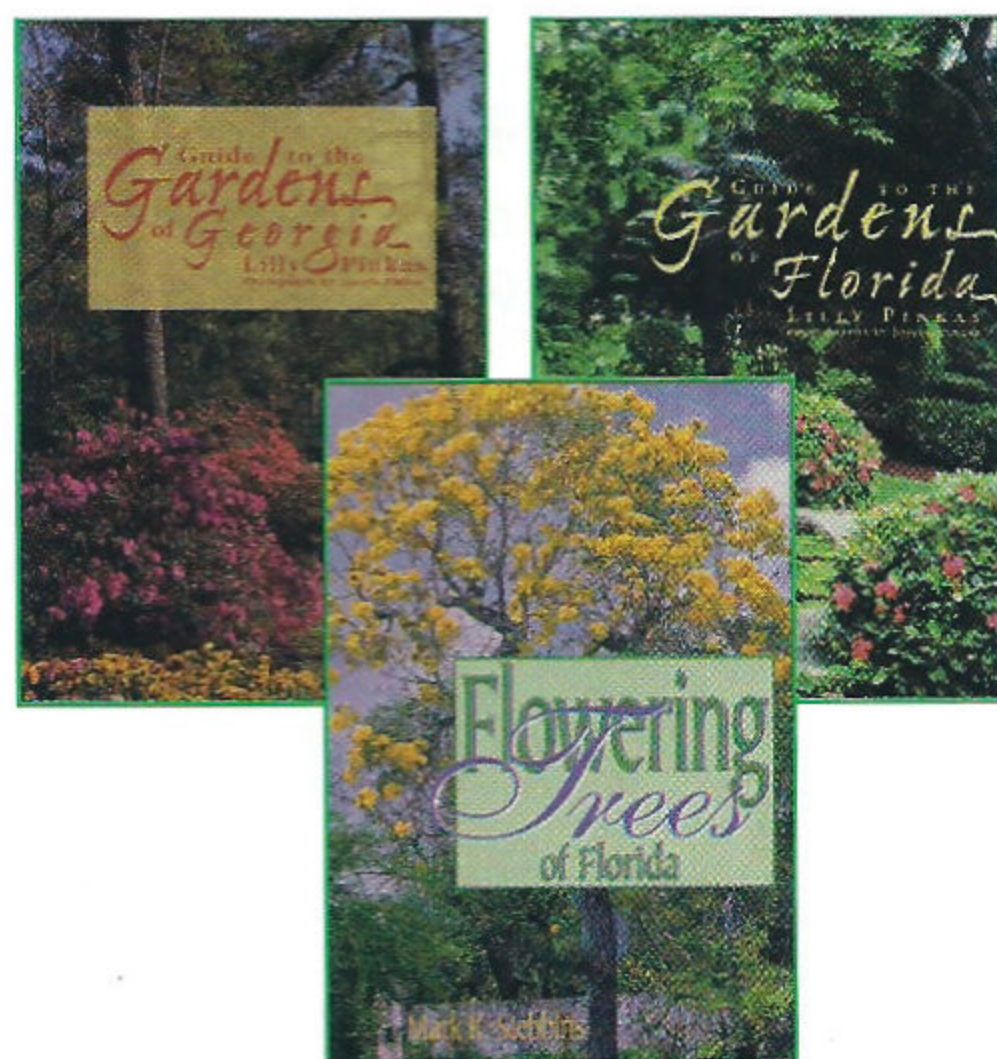
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