

# The Secret to Glorious Morning Glories

by Frederick B. Essig

While growing up in California, I fell in love with the bright saucer-shaped blossoms of the genus *Ipomoea*, the morning glories. The common name stems from the fact that they typically open up first thing in the morning and often close by early afternoon.

Morning glories thrive in California's cool coastal climates, but I never had much luck with them in Florida's sandy soil. I tried several times to grow my favorite Heavenly Blue (a cultivar of *Ipomoea tricolor*), but the seedlings were always sickly and eventually withered away or were eaten by bugs. So for a long time morning glories were on my "you can't grow those in Florida" list.

Over the years, however, I noticed several wild species of morning glory growing here. They're just weedy species, I thought, not the lovely morning glories of cooler climates. But one is a nice blue/purple kind, probably a form of *Ipomoea hederacea*, that grows on fences here in Tampa.

But why haven't I seen any of the spectacular Heavenly Blue, Scarlet O'Hara or other exotic varieties? Taking a wild guess that poor soil, lack of nutrients and water might have something to do with my earlier failures, I decided to plant some Heavenly Blue seeds in large pots of premium potting soil. I was literally knocked



photo by Kathy Nelson

*Some wild species are exceedingly beautiful.*

over by the results. I planted the seeds in late March, and by the middle of May the vines were dripping over my makeshift trellis and covered with brilliant blooms. The secret: morning glories like to be pampered.

So I followed up the next year with a dozen different varieties ordered from reputable seed companies. They included Scarlet O'Hara, Star of Yelta (a form of *Ipomoea purpurea*), several Japanese cultivars of *I. nil*, and the moonflower, *I. alba*, a night-blooming species with white flowers. I nicked the hard seed coats with a razor blade, soaked them in wet paper towels until they began to germinate, then planted them in pots filled with premium potting soil. They popped up enthusiastically within a couple of weeks.



photo by Frederick B. Essig

*In the Imperial Japanese Mt. Fuji hybrids, the emphasis is on bold white stripes on a blue or purple background.*





*Cardinal climber has flowers of intense true scarlet.*

I started in mid-March, but kept the seedlings indoors through some late cold snaps. When they started to twine, I transplanted them to large containers. I kept a natural insecticide handy and intervened when holes began to appear in some of the leaves. All grew spectacularly through May and into June and produced a succession of fine flowers.

Cardinal climber was the first to bloom in mid-May, while the moonflower didn't start flowering until the second week of June. The latter should be called an "evening glory," as it opens in the early evening and stays open through much of the night. It is adapted to be pollinated by nocturnal moths, which it attracts with its pure white color and sweet fragrance.

I tried again to grow some morning glories in the ground as well, this time adding potting mix to the soil and transplanting only after the vines were well-established in gallon pots. I also added a drip irrigation system to insure adequate moisture. As a result, Heavenly Blue and Star of Yelta morning glories are flourishing on my front fence and blooming nicely.

So the spectacular cultivars of morning glory really can be grown in Florida, given the appropriate care. My favorite is still the Heavenly Blue. Its clear blue flowers develop in rapid succession from clusters of buds that extend well above the foliage, forming a spectacular display. Scarlet O' Hara is nice, but more a deep magenta than scarlet. For honest-to-goodness scarlet, grow the more dainty flowers of cardinal climber or cypress vine. The Mt. Fuji mix offers various colors with white stripes and are quite striking, but I didn't care much for the Tie Dye forms. Their flowers were too big and floppy and the colors too disorderly for my taste.

During all of this, my interest in the native species has grown. Perhaps with a little care, some of them will also look good on a fence. According to Wunderlin's *Guide to the Vascular Plants of Florida*, there are 25 species of the genus *Ipomoea* growing wild in Florida. I've discovered 3 wild species growing near my home in Lutz, and have seen other species at the beach and in the Everglades. I found *Ipomoea triloba*, littlebell, growing behind my dentist's



*Heavenly Blue morning glories thrive in a large container by the author's front door.*





*Lovely and romantic moon-flowers open in the evening.*

office. The flowers are small, but a beautiful pink with a deep magenta throat. Incidentally, the native species called "Heavenly Blue" is not the same as the cultivated Heavenly Blue. The native is *Ipomoea violacea*, with larger flowers and coarser foliage.

*Ipomoea* is part of the Convolvulaceae family of some 50 genera and 1200 species. Sweet potato, *Ipomoea batatas*, is an edible member of the genus, as is water spinach, *I. aquatica*, which is a valued green vegetable in the

Orient, but a banned nuisance in Florida. *Convolvulus tricolor*, with flowers of blue and white with yellow throats, is called dwarf morning glory. *Merremia* is another genus of morning-glory-like vines that include the wood rose, and several species with brilliant yellow flowers. An unlikely member of the family is *Dichondra*, a prostrate creeper generally considered a lawn weed in Florida, but sometimes grown as the lawn itself.

I know I am not the only one who has grown morning glory cultivars in Florida, but I hardly ever see them. Now that I have revealed the "secret," perhaps they will become more common.



*Wood rose is an intriguing morning glory relative.*

*Dr. Frederick Essig is an Associate Professor of Biology at USF in Tampa. He revealed the secret to growing calla lilies in our Feb/Mar 01 issue and it really works!*

## SOURCES

**Thompson & Morgan**  
(800)274-7333  
[www.tmseeds.com](http://www.tmseeds.com)

**Park Seed**  
(800)213-0076  
[www.parkseed.com](http://www.parkseed.com)

**Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds**  
(417)924-8917  
[www.rareseeds.com](http://www.rareseeds.com)

## TROPICAL BAMBOO NURSERY

ALL BAMBOO VARIETIES | SALES & RENTALS | EDUCATIONAL PRESENTATIONS

A huge selection of 'clumping' bamboo species with an amazing diversity of sizes, forms, colors (green, black, blue, yellow) and leaf variations all featured in our lush, tropical garden.

Contact us today to learn more about our passion for bamboo and its wide range of landscape applications!



Monday-Friday: 8:00am to 4:30pm  
Saturday: 12:00pm to 4:30pm

2929 G Road East  
Loxahatchee, Florida 33470

Palm Beach 561.784.2413  
Broward 954.461.7572



[www.tropicalbamboo.com](http://www.tropicalbamboo.com)



3-GALLON TO FIELD-GROWN SPECIMENS AVAILABLE. SMALL CONTAINERS SHIP TO MOST U.S. STATES.