

more than *Morning Glories*

BY JESSIE KEITH

From familiar flowering vines to xeriphytic trees, the genus *Ipomoea* has options for everyone's garden.

MORNING GLORIES and their relatives perfectly illustrate the magical qualities of ephemeral flowers. 'Heavenly Blue' morning glories shining in the early sun of a summer's day and giant buds of moonflowers unfurling at dusk soon wither away, but are replaced by new blossoms daily. These old-fashioned flowers have been popular since Victorian times and exemplify what most gardeners envision when they think of *Ipomoea*. But this large and diverse genus offers many more intriguing species beyond the well-known few.

A member of the bindweed family (Convolvulaceae), *Ipomoea* is a primarily pantropic genus, but a few species are indigenous to temperate climate regions. Between 600 and 700 species have been identified, most bearing the familiar funnel-shaped or flared, tubular flowers in various colors that attract a variety of pollinators, particularly bees, hummingbirds, and sphinx or hawk moths.

The most popular garden *Ipomoea* species are ornamental flowering vines and sweet potatoes (*I. batatas*), but others with garden merit are underused perennials, shrubs, and even trees with fantastic flowers. Additionally, a few unusual succulent *Ipomoea* are prized as indoor plants. Then, there are the all-too-common weedy *Ipomoea* that nearly all gardeners will encounter at some point, whether they want to or not (see sidebar, page 17).



The cerulean blooms of 'Heavenly Blue' morning glory echo the sunny sky above.

TWINING VINES

Vining *Ipomoea* are sun lovers that are best distinguished by flower color, shape, and the type of pollinators they attract. Most common are those in shades of violet blue, purple, or pink with lightly fragrant, funnel-shaped flowers; these are pollinated by bees or the occasional butterfly. Red-flowered species typically have flared, tubular flowers that lure hummingbirds. The blossoms of white-flowered species are widely funnel-shaped and fragrant; most open at night for pollinating moths.

One of the most popular species of the bee-pollinated bunch is the classic purple morning glory (*I. purpurea*), which is a tender perennial, typically grown as an annual. Native to Mexico and Central America, it first gained popularity in the 18th century. The twining vine grows up to 10 feet long, has heart-shaped leaves, and flowers from summer to frost. There are numerous old-fashioned varieties—with white-eyed blooms in shades of purple, lavender, and pink. Two of the best are 'Grandpa Ott's', which has velvety purple flowers each marked with a deep red star, and 'Crimson Rambler', with magenta blooms and scarlet stars. Purple morning glory has a propensity to self-sow, so it's a good idea to remove vines at the end of the season before they release excess seed.

As referenced earlier, 'Heavenly Blue' is the most popular variety of the tender perennial Mexican morning glory (*I. tricolor*). In one season, it produces a massive twining vine extending to 15 feet, laden with heart-shaped leaves and tricolored flowers that are violet-blue with white interiors and yellow eyes. Flower density and vine size surpass those of purple morning glory, making this the showier vine. Julia Ehrhardt, community outreach director at the Tyler Arboretum in Media, Pennsylvania, uses this dense vine to provide screening to hide the car parts that her husband stores by their sun deck. "All you see is a giant mound of blue flowers—no car parts," says Ehrhardt.

Blooming begins in late summer—each flower opens in the early morning and closes by midday. New flower buds continue to bloom until frost.



Above: Though it bears lovely white flowers with reddish throats, man-of-the-earth can be difficult to contain. Top: Cardinal climber's profusion of small, red flowers attracts hummingbirds and other pollinators.

Native to the eastern United States, man-of-the-earth (*I. pandurata*) is a hardy perennial vine. It bears large, white, funnel-shaped flowers with rosy-red throats, which attract bees. Its common name refers to the starchy, sweet-potatolike roots that some Native American tribes historically used as a purgative. The wide-spreading vine is attractive, but can be aggressive, reaching up to 30 feet, and difficult to remove once established. Reserve it for fence lines and wild plantings

where a clambering flowering vine for native bees would be welcome.

Hummingbirds love the flared red flowers of cardinal climber (*I. x multifida*), which is a hybrid between the Central

American red cypress vine (*I. quamoclit*) and South American redstar (*I. coccinea*). Delicate in appearance, but quite robust in habit, this perennial vine is often grown as an annual, reaching 15 feet tall with the support of a trellis. It has attractive, fernlike green leaves and small, but prolific, scarlet flowers that appear in summer and continue into fall. They provide nectar for migrating hummingbirds as they head south.

One of the most desirable of the hummingbird-pollinated morning glories is Spanish flag (*I. lobata*, syn. *Mina lobata*). A perennial in its native Mexico and South America, it is grown as an annual in temperate gardens. With support, this twining vine grows eight to 12 feet tall. “Trellises work better than a single pole or stake, and the plant is ideal for pot culture,” says Karan Davis Cutler, editor of *Flowering Vines, Beautiful Climbers* (Brooklyn Botanic Garden, 1999). In late summer, one-sided sprays of tubular flowers explode into bloom, starting off red, and then morphing to yellow then cream. “Spanish flag and firecracker vine are apt names, but *Ipomoea*

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lobata always makes me think of a shower of candy corn,” says Cutler.

Illuminate your patio garden with moonflower (*I. alba*), a fragrant, night-flowering vine pollinated by sphinx moths. From midsummer to fall, six-inch, white flowers unfurl in the evening and remain open until morning, emitting a delightfully sweet fragrance. Where native in the American subtropics and tropics, vines can reach 70 feet and are perennial; grown as an annual in temperate gardens, they rarely top 15 feet. It’s a good choice for deer-resistant



Spanish flag produces an eye-catching display of blooms comprised of several individual flowers that gradually turn from red to yellow and cream so that all three colors are present on each raceme.

gardens, according to Carole Ottesen, a contributing writer for this magazine. “I’m growing white moonflower this year as part of my garden of ‘liver-and-onion’ plants for deer—things they’ll only eat if they are starving,” says Ottesen.

Sweet potatoes (*I. batatas*) are vines of the tropical Americas valued both as ornamentals and vegetables. The rare-to-bloom, ornamental sweet potatoes are effortless heat-loving spreaders grown for their heart-shaped or dissected leaves that range in color from chartreuse to dark purple or

variegated. Cultivars may be compact or vining, and look best along sunny borders or as container plantings.

Edible sweet potatoes produce white, yellow, or purple-fleshed tuberous roots that are sweet, starchy, and high in beta-carotene. They are best grown in mounds of fertile soil, for good root development and easy harvest. (For more about growing edible sweet potatoes, see “Sweet Potatoes: Culinary and Nutritious Superstars” in the September/October 2016 issue of this magazine.)

BEWARE WEEDY IPOMOEA

There is a long list of unwanted *Ipomoea*, and the worst offenders require real effort to eradicate, even for specialists.

As its common name suggests, mile-a-minute (*I. cairica*) is a fast-spreading weed. It is particularly problematic in the American South, where its palmate leaves and pink to lavender, funnel-shaped flowers might fool one into growing them.



I. cairica is an aggressive weed.

However, this attractive monster will take over a garden space in no time, developing deep underground stems that resist removal. Early detection and eradication is best. Once you identify mile-a-minute, cut back the top and dig out as much of the root system as possible. To keep underground stems from returning, cover the area with landscape cloth and mulch it over. After a season, all parts should be smothered.

Ivy-leaved morning glory (*I. hederacea*) is considered invasive throughout the eastern United States and in much of the lower Midwest. Thankfully, this annual vine is not nearly as aggressive as its perennial counterparts. It has ivy-shaped leaves and bears small, purplish flowers that look almost ornamental. High seed and seedling output is the cause of its unwanted spread. Manage it by pulling vines early, before they flower. The weak-rooted plants don’t take much effort to remove.

Though not a true *Ipomoea*, bindweed (*Convolvulus arvensis*) is a closely related morning glory lookalike that deserves mention. This noxious weed from Eurasia has managed to spread throughout North America. The aggressive perennial vine develops spreading systems of impossible-to-reach rooting stems that pop up everywhere, and small, white flowers that resemble morning glory blossoms followed by heavily seeded fruits. Once a bed has bindweed, it is nearly impossible to eradicate, and gardeners are often forced to dig up coveted perennials and shrubs to fully remove it. Manage bindweed as you would mile-a-minute. Weed killers won’t touch this one. —J.K.



Like other ornamental sweet potatoes, ‘Sweet Caroline Purple’ is grown primarily for its striking foliage, but it occasionally produces small, pinkish-purple blooms.

LESS-COMMON, NON-VINING SPECIES

Not all *Ipomoea* are vines. Native to the arid deciduous forests of Sonora, Mexico, tree morning glory (*I. arborescens*, USDA Hardiness Zones 9–11, AHS Heat Zones 11–8) bears clusters of white flowers in the cool winter months. Though not adaptable to most North American gardens, they thrive in the dry regions of the American Southwest. These fast-growing trees can also be cultivated in large containers as conservatory specimens. Dense, succulent trunks with branches reaching up to 18 feet support deciduous, heart-shaped, deep green leaves during the summer rainy season, falling as the winter dry season approaches. The funnel-shaped flowers appear to glow on the bare branches in winter, attracting long-nosed bats and hummingbirds.

Bush morning glory (*I. leptophylla*, Zones 4–9, 10–4) is a hardy perennial with many laudable traits. “Not only are the luminous lavender-pink flowers five or more inches across—often produced in profusion—they bloom at the very hottest, driest time of the year, sustained even during droughts by the enormous root,” says Panayoti Kelaidis, senior curator and director of outreach at the Denver Botanic Gardens in Colorado, who adds, “It’s a one-plant entertainment center—just what gardeners love!”



The stems of bush morning glory arch to form one- to three-foot-tall clumps that produce loads of large, lavender-pink flowers in the heat and drought of summer.

Native to the sandy plains and prairies of North America, it sports linear leaves that resist heat and water loss. “Serious xeriscapers in Colorado grow it, but it is probably not a plant for maritime climates—unless grown in a container and protected from excessive moisture in the winter,” says Kelaidis.

Africa is home to a few succulent *Ipomoea* oddballs with bulbous caudiciform bases. Among them is *I. bolusiana*, which is distinguished by a bulbous base resembling a husked coconut topped with languorous stems lined with threadlike leaves. Purplish-pink morning glory flowers are produced at the stem tips from spring to fall. It is easy to grow as a potted specimen, if provided with very free-draining potting mix and lots of light. Water it sparingly in winter.

GROWING VINING IPOMOEA

Vining *Ipomoea* thrive in full sun and well-drained fertile soil with a neutral pH. Climbing support—a trellis or fence—is a must, except for ornamental sweet potato, which is usually grown as an annual groundcover or in a container.

Most *Ipomoea* vines are grown as annuals in temperate gardens though they are often perennial in their native tropical environment. In frost-free areas, some species are aggressive to the point of becoming a nuisance, so be forewarned.

If starting vines from seed, keep in mind that most *Ipomoea* seeds are toxic, so they are not a good choice for small kids to plant. Start them just after the last frost date. Seeds germinate better if they are gently scratched with a nail file and wrapped overnight in a damp paper towel. Start them indoors in small pots of fine, moist potting mix, and place them in a sunny window or under grow lights. Once they sprout, plant the seedlings outdoors as soon as possible. Some people are sensitive to the sap of *Ipomoea* plants, so it’s a good idea to wear gloves when handling them.

A trellis laden with glorious summer-flowering morning glories is a sight to behold and a boon to visiting pollinators. Plant an *Ipomoea* vine, or a lesser-known relative, to bring old-fashioned charm or new appeal to your garden both day and night!

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