

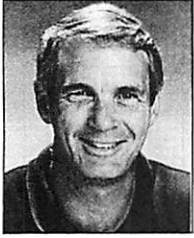
Texas Petunia (*Ruellia brittoniana*)

by Allan Armitage, Department of Horticulture, University of Georgia

Ruellia (rue-elle' e-a)
Blue, lavender

Texas Petunia, Mexican Petunia
Texas, Florida

Acanthaceae
3-5'2'



Introduction

About six years ago, I was being lead by the hand around unknown plant territory in south Texas, feeling like a complete dolt in my lack of plant knowledge. I had occasionally met the *Ruellia* group here and there prior to this trip, but its diversity really hit home at this time.

Here is a gem of a genus that has been idling along in nurseries in the southwest but is almost never seen in the great northland. My eyes hath seen the coming of the glory of the *Ruellia*, but mostly my eyes gazed upon tall and lanky plants. I have no doubt that consumers would purchase some of these unkempt beauties if provided the opportunity, but they simply wouldn't fit into most growers programs. Flowers of the taller species are usually blue to lavender, but they also can be found in light blue, white or red.

However, without doubt, at least to the Armitage mind, the plant that needs to be discovered by one and all is the dwarf form, 'Katie's Dwarf'.

Basic Marketing Strategies (for salespeople)

Pros and Cons of *Ruellia* 'Katie's Dwarf'

Pros: Performs exceptionally well in warm summers, insufficient testing has been carried out in the North to determine how performance will be in cool summers. They provide months of deep blue to lavender flowers once temperatures rise above 70F. They can be used in containers, baskets or in the ground. No particular disease problems I am aware of.

Cons: Only presently available in a single color, but see cultivars below. Plants in the South reseed in the landscape and can become somewhat of a pest. Plants will not flower well if sold too early in the spring (think warmth).

Use In the Landscape and Garden:

The plant has not been grown long enough to know what it will do everywhere in the country. It is an excellent combination plant for planting at the front of the landscape or as a filler in baskets (like a begonia) with yellow-flowering lantanas or white trailing petunias. They start a little slow but as the weather warms up, they grow rapidly. Heat tolerance is excellent. They are not tall plants, but eventually stretch to about 18" and by the end of the season become a little woody. Consumers should be told that plants are likely to reseed the following spring, and in the South can become a pest. But it beats the heck out of dandelions.

Basic Production Strategies (for growers):

Propagation: Vegetatively, from cuttings and division or from seedlings. Terminal cuttings benefit from a root hormone, but it is not

necessary, then placed in a well-drained rooting medium with 72-75F bottom heat. Rooting will occur in plugs in 2-3 weeks. Can be direct stuck or transplanted to 4" pots in 3-4 weeks. Seeds can be gathered but since each flower produces only two seeds, it is much easier to plant some stock plants on a seed bed, and transplant seedlings as they emerge. If this is to become a major crop, someone will need to offer seeds.

Growing-on: Provide as much sunlight as possible. Clean bays where plants are to be grown. Supplemental lighting is useful to enhance growth in the winter, and will be helpful if trying to force plants early. For late spring flowering, likely not necessary in most areas of the country. Plant growth will be delayed at temperatures below 60F; day temperatures of 70-75F day temperatures are recommended, night temperatures of 65F are recommended. Best finished in a 4" container, but for larger containers (one gallon, ~6" pot), two plants per container can be used or additional time need be provided. For baskets, 3 cuttings per 10-12" basket. Plants will finish in 4-8 weeks from a rooted cutting, depending on the container size and season.

No particular nutritional needs. Nutrition of 75-100ppm N 20-10-20 seems to be adequate, few nutritional problems have been seen. No growth regulators needed.

In the greenhouse, white flies can be a problem. Also, germinating seeds can become somewhat of a weed problem in ground beds and under benches, but fret not, this is not another *Oxalis*.

Schedule: (guidelines only)

For April 15 sales (South):

<u>Feb 15</u>	<u>Mar 10</u>	<u>April 15</u>
Root cuttings	Transplant (or buy) to final cont.	Sell in 4" pot

For May 15 sales (North):

<u>Apr 1</u>	<u>Apr 21</u>	<u>May 15</u>
Root	Transplant (or buy) for final cont.	Sell in 4" pot

Cultivars:

Recently, a chance seedling was discovered in the nursery and has been named Pink Katie by Pat McNeil of McNeil Nursery. I have not tested it yet and do not know if the pink color holds up in the heat. Both the blue and the pink forms resulted from chance seedlings of *R. brittoniana* and a white dwarf form will probably show up soon. I understand that a nursery is wishing to patent 'Pink Katie' but because of its random appearance and impossibility of controlling seedlings which appear, it seems a bit of a problem. Stock of 'Katie Pink' is presently being built up and some should be available by summer, 1998. (continued on next page)

A dwarf variegated leaf form 'Strawberries and Cream' has also appeared in catalogs. Pink and white variegated leaves and blue flowers.

Availability:

A number of nurseries in the South carry *Ruellia*. They include TreeSearch Farm (Katie's Dwarf, Strawberries and Cream; fax 713-937-1224), Carolina Nursery (Katie's Dwarf; fax 803-761-4793), and McNeil Nursery (Katie's Dwarf, Pink Katie; phone 512-2802233, email limmrick@io.com). Plant distributors may also handle *Ruellia*.

Basic Retail Strategies (for the final customer)

Plant in full sun. They need to be placed in well-drained soils for best performance, but otherwise are trouble free. Large plantings are effective and may be placed on 12-18" centers. They work in garden situations but also do wonderfully well in large patio containers where the growth is restricted.

They associate well with yellows and other purple flowered plants. They also look well when upright plants, such as celosia, upright lantana or zinnia are interplanted.

Many thanks to Scott Reeves of TreeSearch Farms, Houston, TX; Linda Guy of Mercer Botanic Garden, Humble, TX; and Pat McNeil, McNeil Growers, Manchaca, TX.

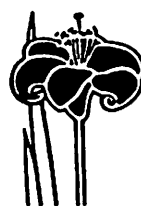
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