

# Capers — *Capparis spinosa* L.<sup>1</sup>

James M. Stephens<sup>2</sup>

Capers are unopened flower buds produced on the caperbush. This shrubby perennial plant grows 3-5 feet high, with numerous branches, bearing a pair of hooked spines at the base of each leaf stalk. Leaves are alternate, round to ovate, thick, and glistening. Flowers are about 2 inches in diameter, white with numerous violet stamens, and very pleasing in appearance. Seeds are large, kidney shaped, and gray-brown in color. There is also a variety without spines, from which the crop is gathered more easily and without injury to the hands.

Caperbush is native to the Mediterranean region where the plant is still grown commercially. Little if any is grown in the United States, even in home gardens. Capers shipped to Britain and other European countries generally are grown in Spain and Africa. Southern Russia was a major exporter at one time. In Northern Africa the most commonly used caper is the Timbuctoo caper (*C. sodala*). A popular South African caper is *C. corymbifera*.

## USE

Capers are picked daily since the youngest flowerbuds (about the size of peas) have the highest quality. Capers are valued in proportion to the smallness of their size. They are pickled in vinegar, or sometimes in salted vinegar. Both the capers and the young berries are used in sauces and pickling, primarily by Europeans.

## CULTURE

Little is known about the culture of capers in the United States or Florida. The literature indicates that the caperbush can be cultivated profitably only in the climate of the olive tree, where it is almost always planted in dry stony places, on embankments, and other difficult to use areas.

Caperbush can be propagated from seed, but finding a seed source is difficult. A search of the U.S. herb and vegetable seed catalogs reveals no mention of capers. Anyone in Florida who finds a start might have luck growing it in a large pot using crumbled brick or other coarse material.

1. This document is HS573, one of a series of the Horticultural Sciences Department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Original publication date May 1994. Revised March 2009. Reviewed January 2012. Visit the EDIS website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

2. James M. Stephens, Professor, Horticultural Sciences Department, Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville FL 32611.