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How to Identify and Propagate Different Types of Wild Coffee for Your Florida Garden[1]

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Introduction

Rubiaceae is a large family of flowering plants that includes popular genera of economic importance (i.e., coffee) and ornamental value (gardenia, ixora, pentas). A number of its species are native to Florida, like buttonbush, firebush, indigoberry, and wild coffee. Plants native to Florida can be particularly favorable in landscapes for their versatility, durability, and attraction of native pollinators because these plants have been here since the time of European contact, thus are accustomed to our extreme weather events, and their pollinators have lived alongside them for that entire duration (Florida Native Plant Society, n.d.). The wild coffees, belonging to the genus *Psychotria*, stand out as champions in the garden because of their attractive curb appeal, interesting leaves, sweet-smelling flowers, and beautiful red fruit. Found naturally as an understory plant of hammocks, pine flatwoods, and even coastal shell mounds, wild coffees will do best if provided partial shade and water during long periods of drought. Occurring mostly in parts of Florida's peninsula, wild coffees are adaptable to a range of coastal and inland soil conditions. While a variety of birds may favor wild coffees for their savory fruit, bees may visit their flowers for nectar and pollen. All the while, keep your eyes open for butterfly visitors, such as the Atala, Julia, and Schaus's swallowtails, as well.

Depending on where you live in Florida, you may be able to grow various types of wild coffee that are commercially available. Florida, renowned for its rich biodiversity, is home to three native *Psychotria* species: wild coffee (*Psychotria nervosa*), softleaf wild coffee (*Psychotria tenuifolia*), and Bahama wild coffee (*Psychotria ligustrifolia*) (Gann et al. 2005–2016; Wunderlin et al. 2025) (Figure 1). While Bahama coffee faces critical endangerment in southern Florida, both wild coffee and softleaf wild coffee are more widely populated and not presently at risk.

Figure 1. (A) Wild coffee (*Psychotria nervosa*). (B) Softleaf wild coffee (*Psychotria tenuifolia*). (C) Bahama wild coffee (*Psychotria ligustrifolia*). Credits: Sandra B. Wilson, UF/IFAS

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Together, these different plant forms can make attractive additions to our Florida-friendly landscapes and gardens, with white flowers appearing in the summer and red fruit emerging in the fall. Wild coffees are versatile, serving effectively as hedges, borders, and mass plantings while tolerating shade, part shade, and even full sun in certain environments (Figure 2). Indigenous to Florida's peninsula, wild coffee and softleaf wild coffee thrive in mesic and rockland hammocks, attaining heights of 4 to 8 feet with spreads between 4 to 8 feet. They are well-suited for USDA plant hardiness zones 9a–11 and display moderate salt tolerance. For the last decade, UF/IFAS has been evaluating the winter performance of these plants in teaching gardens located on the main campus in Gainesville (north central Florida). In mild winters, they remain evergreen. However, if prolonged freeze events occur, they will die back to the ground and usually regrow in the spring. Take care to mulch or protect plants in temperate areas of Florida. Conversely, Bahama wild coffee, a rare species native to the mainland and the Florida Keys rockland hammocks, showcases variations in height and spread, typically reaching 3 to 4 feet. It exhibits lower cold tolerance (hardiness zones 9b–11), higher sun tolerance, and lower salt tolerance (Table 1).

Figure 2. A representation of how multiple wild coffee species and cultivars can be utilized effectively in a garden landscape, providing lush green foliage and adding to the aesthetic appeal of the area.
Credits: Sandra B. Wilson, UF/IFAS

Cultivated forms of these species (i.e., selections for novel forms, leaf morphology, internode length, and floral abundance) are largely unknown or not available, except for dwarf types of *Psychotria nervosa* (wild coffee). The first, initially identified by Brightman Logan, is known as wild coffee Little Psycho™ (Figure 3A). The second, more recently introduced by Marc Godts of Green Isle Gardens, is named wild coffee 'Turtle Mound' (Figure 3B).

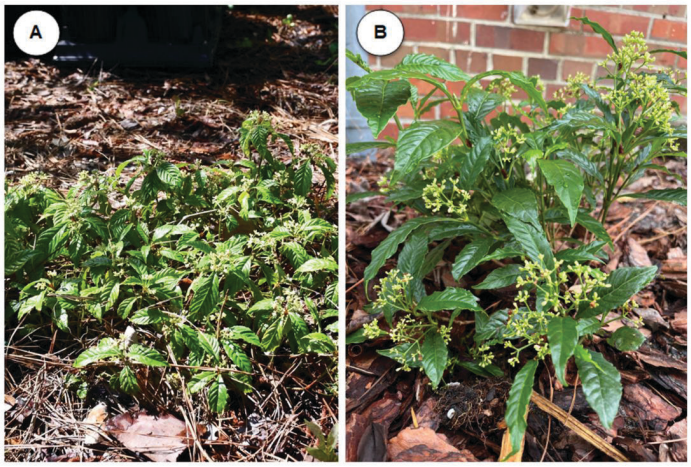

Figure 3. (A) Wild coffee Little Psycho™ (*Psychotria nervosa* 'Little Psycho'). (B) Wild coffee 'Turtle Mound' (*Psychotria nervosa* 'Turtle Mound').
Credits: Sandra B. Wilson and Teagan Young, UF/IFAS

Identification

Identification of these *Psychotria* taxa relies on leaf and fruit characteristics. These species share characteristics such as simple, oppositely arranged leaves with entire margins and prominent veins, cymose inflorescences bearing fragrant white flowers (Figure 4A), and two-seeded fruit—longitudinally ribbed drupes with a fleshy, reddish pericarp and fibrous root systems (Figure 4B). Wild coffee and wild coffee Little Psycho™ display shiny green leaves with conspicuous veining and oblong red drupes, while softleaf wild coffee presents duller, bluish-green leaves with smaller, orange-to-red drupes. In contrast, Bahama wild coffee features smaller leaves with lighter midribs and less pronounced veining and bears larger fruit than softleaf wild coffee (Figure 4C).

The dwarf wild coffee Little Psycho™ presents a unique variation as a shorter, more horizontal form, reaching a height of 2 to 3 feet with shorter internode length and many flowers (AgriStarts, n.d.). The dwarf wild coffee 'Turtle Mound', originally seed collected from a shell mound along the Canaveral National Seashore, reaches only about 2 feet in height (Marc Godts, pers. comm., 2022).

Propagation

Information on propagating wild coffees is still limited, particularly regarding seed germination, which is hindered by physiological dormancy. Initial findings by Pereira and Wilson suggest that spring and summer are ideal seasons for seed germination of wild coffee, softleaf wild coffee, and Bahama wild coffee (unpublished data; Marc Godts, pers. comm., 2022). However, germination results fluctuated over the course of five months. Other barriers to seed

propagation are narrow time windows for seed collection and low seed storability.

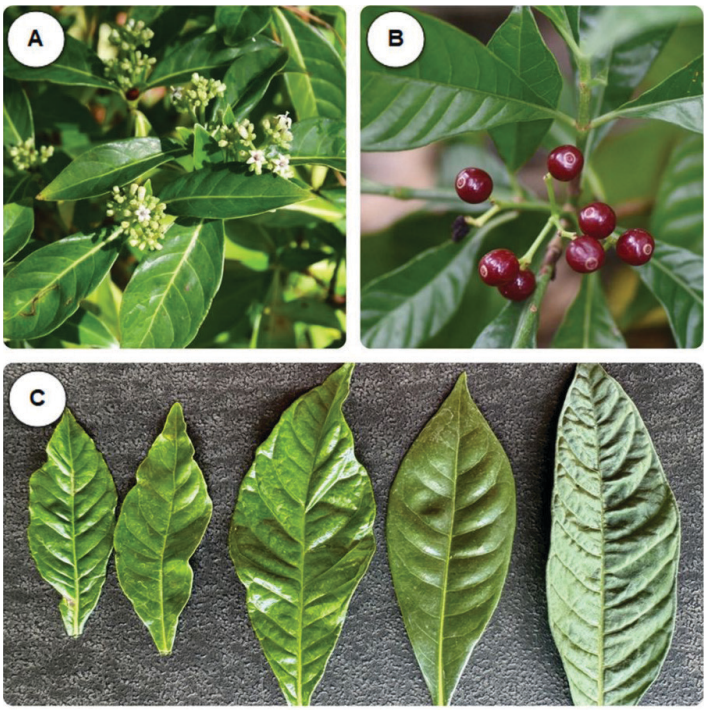

Figure 4. Typical flowering, fruiting, and foliage of *Psychotria* sp. with prominently veined, elliptical leaves. (A) White, cymose, terminal inflorescences. (B) Two-seeded, ovoid drupes, which eventually turn red in color. (C) Leaves of five taxa compared side-by-side from left to right: wild coffee 'Turtle Mound' (*Psychotria nervosa* 'Turtle Mound'), wild coffee Little Psycho™ (*Psychotria nervosa* 'Little Psycho'), wild coffee (*Psychotria nervosa*), Bahama wild coffee (*Psychotria ligustrifolia*), and softleaf wild coffee (*Psychotria tenuifolia*).
Credits: Sandra B. Wilson and Teagan Young, UF/IFAS

Propagation by cuttings can be conducted in small pots; however, it is advisable to conduct it in nursery flats with individual cells, using well-drained propagation mixes containing bark, peat, and perlite, as demonstrated by research (Young et al. 2022). Collect softwood cuttings, ideally ranging from 2 to 4 inches in length and taken from terminal shoots with a minimum of five nodes, during the spring or fall and store them for transportation in plastic bags or a cooler. Be sure to treat the base of each cutting with water before inserting them to a depth of 1/2 to 3/4 inches in talc-based auxin (Figure 5). Daily intermittent misting, being the most effective method to retain moisture, is essential to prevent cuttings from drying out. Also, keep cuttings under natural light conditions.

Almost three-quarters of the cuttings will root within 14 days without the application of a rooting hormone. However, the provision of an auxin called indole-3-butyric acid (IBA) improves root quality. IBA from Hormex® (Mainland, Pennsylvania), up to 8,000 ppm or 0.8%, has shown success in rooting these taxa. Homeowners can find numerous products containing this active ingredient at local garden centers or through online platforms, with concentrations ranging from 0.1% to 1.6%. To prevent cutting burn and ensure successful rooting, using IBA at any concentration over 0.8% is not recommended. Moreover, any IBA concentration below 0.8% is likely to increase rooting success.

Figure 5. Example of a wild coffee cutting properly prepared for an application of talc auxin.
Credits: Sandra B. Wilson, UF/IFAS

At a concentration of 0.8% talc, IBA can significantly enhance root initiation, with success rates around 87% on average among all the different species of wild coffees evaluated. Auxin treatment can also enhance specific aspects of root quality, such as root quantity and length.

Production

The production schedule for these taxa usually takes place in the spring and fall months. Place cuttings into a bark-based substrate such as Miracle-Gro potting soil; a homemade mix consisting of six parts bark, three parts peat, and one part perlite; or a commercial planting mix such as Metro-Mix (Sun Gro Horticulture, Agawam, Massachusetts). Many commercial growers utilize 72-cell trays, with root growth typically beginning within three to four weeks. Keep the plants in the propagation flats and mist them consistently for seven to eight weeks to develop a complete root system. After eight weeks, when transplanted into 4-inch or 1-quart pots, the plants need another four-to-six-week period for full root development. To ensure optimal nutrient levels, applying a slow-release fertilizer around the base of the plant is recommended. For specific application guidelines, please refer to the fertilizer label.

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Table 1. Native distribution, ecosystem, description, and attracted pollinators of four *Psychotria* taxa evaluated for cutting propagation.

Scientific name	Common name	USDA plant hardiness zone[a]	Florida distribution[b]	Florida ecosystem[b]	Description[c]	Pollinator/wildlife use
Psychotria ligustrifolia	Bahama wild coffee	9b to 11	Southern peninsula	Rockland hammocks and pine rocklands	3 to 4 ft tall, 3 to 4 ft wide, green foliage, 0.25 in x 0.24 in showy red drupes	Birds, bees, wasps, flies
Psychotria nervosa	Wild coffee	9a to 11	Peninsula	Hammocks	4 to 8 ft tall, 4 to 8 ft wide, glossy green foliage, 0.32 in x 0.27 in showy red drupes	Birds, butterflies, bees, wasps, flies, beetles
Psychotria nervosa 'Little Psycho'	Dwarf wild coffee Little Psycho™	9a to 11	Cultivated	Found in a hammock in central west Florida	12 to 36 in tall, glossy green foliage, 0.34 in x 0.30 in showy red drupes larger than the parent	Bees, butterflies
Psychotria tenuifolia	Softleaf wild coffee	9a to 11	Central and southern peninsula	Hammocks	4 to 8 ft tall, 4 to 8 ft wide, dull green foliage, 0.23 in x 0.22 in showy red drupes	Bees, butterflies, birds

[a] USDA-ARS (2012). Please note that this research used the map from 2012, but the USDA-ARS released a newer version in 2023.
[b] Wunderlin and Hansen (2011).
[c] Plant size descriptors were based on observations of plants in north central Florida. For drupe size, ten drupes were measured and presented as a mean.