



Henderson County Master Gardeners

Weekly News Article

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A Hummingbird's Delight

By Lydia Holley

Hummingbirds are the garden's jewels. Shimmering with an emerald coat, the ruby-throated hummingbird is a delightful visitor to most gardeners in East Texas. However, they demand a constant food supply to meet their energy needs.



I have found that hummingbirds prefer the sweet nectar of real flowers to the home-brew of sugar-water. One of the plants that have hummingbirds buzzing around it this time of the year is turk's cap, *Malvaviscus arboreus* var. *drummondii*.

Turk's cap is one of those bullet-proof plants that most any gardener can grow. Is it a Texas native? Yes, it is. Will it grow in full sun? Yes, it will. Does it grow in shade? Yes, it does. It is particular about soils? No, it will grow just about anywhere you place it, from clay to sand, and in acidic or alkaline soils. Named a Texas Superstar® plant, reportedly it is even hard to kill with glyphosate. That is one tough plant.

The best thing about turk's cap, though, is not that it is a tough-as-nails plant. The best thing is that hummingbirds flock to it for their daily drink. Although bright, the flowers are small, about one inch long, and never completely open. It also features a single stamen coming out of the middle of the folded bloom like a miniature flagpole. These little odd-shaped blooms may irritate some, but the hummingbirds do not seem to mind.

Turk's cap forms a shrub from three to six feet tall, with a spread of around three to five feet. Although most commonly seen with red blooms, there are also pink- and white-blooming varieties and even a red-blooming type with variegated leaves.

Turk's cap produces small berries in the autumn. According to the Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center, both the flowers and the fruit are edible. I have not tried them.

If you do not currently grow turks' cap, you might want to consider adding one or more to your garden. The hummingbirds will be delighted.

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