

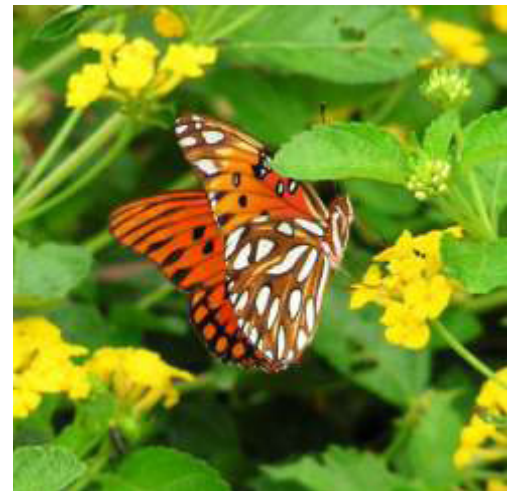
Friday's Feature**By****Theresa Friday**

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Provide passion vine if you are passionate about butterflies

As the name implies, the Gulf fritillary butterfly haunts the Gulf of Mexico and is the most commonly seen butterfly along the Gulf Coast this time of year. In Florida, it can be found in all 67 counties.

The Gulf fritillary can be identified by the striking silver spots on its underside. The adult butterfly is bright orange with black markings and has a 2½ to 3¾ inch wingspan. It is a beautiful butterfly that many people want to attract to their garden. The adult is frequently seen on nectar-producing verbena, penta, phlox, porterweed and lantana.



The larva, or caterpillar, of the Gulf fritillary grows to approximately 1½ inches in length and is bright orange in color. It is covered in rows of black spines on its head and back. The spines are soft to the touch and do not sting. However, the caterpillars are poisonous if eaten, as the bright coloration advertises. Their toxic flesh provides Gulf fritillary caterpillars with excellent protection from predators.

The Gulf fritillary adult female lays her eggs and the caterpillars feed on plants in the *Passiflora* genus. There are many species of *Passiflora*, also known as passionflower or passion vine.

Our native passionflower, *Passiflora incarnata*, can be found growing on sunny fence lines and in open fields throughout the region. Commonly called maypops, for the sound they make when stepped on, the fruits are edible, with pomegranate-like seed pods filled with rich juice. Some gardeners will tell you it's called maypop because it may pop-up anywhere in your garden.

Passion vine is a fast-growing perennial vine which uses its tendrils to attach to fences, trees, or other supports, usually reaching heights of 10 to 20 feet. Frosts will kill it back to the ground, but it will happily reappear in the spring, but not always where you planted it.

This is a plant known to sucker and can cover a large area fairly quickly. On the other hand, a little maintenance yields a nice vine with some of the most exotic flowers in the world.

Passion vines require good drainage and plenty of sunlight to be prolific bloomers. Provide a good support structure and keep well mulched. A light application of fertilizer in late spring and mid-summer keeps the foliage looking its best.

Passion vine is chemically protected by toxins, which prevents most insects from feeding on it, so it has few pest problems. It is, however, fed upon by the Gulf fritillary caterpillar, which can totally defoliate the vine. Insecticides should be avoided if attracting these winged creatures is a priority. Many gardeners grow passion vine primarily to attract butterflies to their gardens and don't care about its ragged appearance in late summer.

All of the passionflowers have beautifully complex blossoms and maypop is no exception. They have large flowers, usually 3-5 inches in diameter.

Since passion vine sends up new plants yards away from where it was planted, getting new plants is as easy as pulling up the unwanted sprouts and putting them in containers. These sprouts have a better survival rate if part of the root is attached to it, but you must dig down a bit. Just pulling the sprout will detach it from its root.



The passion vine is a versatile flowering vine that just might have a place in your yard. Plant one for the beauty of the flower and the knowledge that you are supporting the Gulf fritillary butterfly.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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