

When you meet someone for the first time, one of the things you ask is “where are you from?” Many of us are from other places across the U.S. and beyond. We now live in a dynamic global society and never again will communities become stagnant. Leaving behind everything familiar to relocate takes a strong character. It’s much easier to stay in an original location than it is to move on to new places.

Consider plants in the same way. Our non-native plants did not originate in Florida, but have been relocated here from other places across the U.S. or beyond. Some non-natives can cause problems by spreading and competing with our native plants in natural areas. But many non-natives prove to be just what we need for certain jobs in the landscape.

Take the perennial peanut, for instance, which grows well south of the Georgia-Florida border. This non-native low ground cover was introduced from Brazil in 1936. It is not invasive and shows promise as a lovely low maintenance plant for Florida. Many homeowners and municipalities have had great success with the perennial peanut as an ornamental plant in the landscape.

The perennial peanut has no major insect or disease problems. When an introduced plant has no natural population controls, they often become a problem as an invasive. But this plant spreads slowly by rhizomes (underground runners). There are no seeds produced to be scattered by wind, water or wildlife. Edging can be used to keep the plant in a confined area.

Although the peanut will grow in shade, it won’t grow to be as thickly carpeted as in full sun. The plant is very hardy but the foliage is often browned by frost in north and central Florida. Weeds are not a problem because they cannot compete in the thick growth of the peanut. The University of Florida does recommend that the planting bed is treated for weeds before planting, however, and certain chemical herbicide applications should be made during the establishment period. Read all about how to establish your own perennial peanut bed by visiting the UF/IFAS site <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/EP135>

After establishment, infertile soils are no problem. The perennial peanut is a legume. Legumes have specialized bacteria on the roots that take nitrogen from the air and change it into a form that plants use as a nutrient. Essentially, the plant produces its own fertilizer. Dollars are saved when fertilizer applications are not needed, and the environment is saved from possible nutrient leaching.

The perennial peanut is a plant that is well worth welcoming to your Florida landscape. Besides saving fertilizer costs, this ground cover is well adapted to our dry conditions and will save on irrigation costs. Because it spreads slowly, the low plantings can be easily confined in the desired location. The yellow flowers are not only attractive, but they are also edible and have a nutty flavor.

You are welcome to attend the Master Gardener Presentations at the Columbia County Library in downtown Lake City. The September 19th topic is Vegetable Gardening and it will begin at 1pm. Master Gardeners are available on Tuesday, Thursday and Friday mornings to answer gardening questions. Call 752-5384. *(Published 9-13-09)*