Confederate Roses for the South

Oaklawn Cemetery, located just northwest of the post office in Lake City, is the final resting place for 155 unknown Confederate soldiers who died in the 1864 Battle of Olustee, or in a Confederate hospital. This information is engraved on an old marker located in the Civil War Veteran area of Oaklawn Cemetery.

A rich and important part of our North Florida heritage lies buried right within our own neighborhood. This area of the cemetery, dedicated to honor those who have made the ultimate sacrifice in war, was in need of attention. Recently, with the help of the University of Florida Master Gardeners of Columbia County, the entrance received new landscape plantings.

What better plant could be chosen to adorn this civil war cemetery than the Confederate Rose, *Hibiscus mutabilis*? This plant, among a selection of other low maintenance, drought resistant plants, was chosen to add color and bold accents to the cemetery entrance.

The confederate rose is not really a rose, and it isn’t even a native of the South. However, by the 19th century, this Asian native was a favorite plant in southern gardens. We now lovingly refer to the confederate rose as an old-fashioned garden plant of the South.

The species grows in an upright tree form, often reaching heights of 15 feet in freeze-free counties. In North Florida, even the frosts will generally burn the plants back to the ground. They will grow back in the spring from the roots, but will have a multi-trunked form and reach a height of 6 to 8 feet.

The blossoms, which appear in late summer and fall, open white and change to pink and deep pink over several days. The novelty of having three different colors of flowers on one plant at the same time is very eye-catching. The leaves of the Confederate rose are large and bold, allowing the plant to stand out in the landscape, even when not in bloom.

If you give a confederate rose a home in your southern garden, be sure to plant it in sun or part sun. It isn’t choosy about soils and can tolerate some drought after being established in its new surroundings.

Frosts and freezes can happen any night now, so listen to the weather and be ready to protect tender plants. Call the Master Gardeners at 752-5384 for tips on winter plant protection.

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