

Acalypha wilkesiana: Copperleaf¹

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<https://ffl.ifas.ufl.edu/>

This document is part of a series originally written by Edward F. Gilman.

Introduction

Copperleaf is a fast-growing evergreen shrub that provides a continuous splash of color in the landscape (Figure 1). This plant's 4- to 8-inch-long heart-shaped leaves are available in varying mottled color combinations, depending upon cultivar selection (Figure 2). Color combinations range from bronze to muted red, green, maroon, yellow, orange, pink, or white (Figure 3). Cultivars with varying leaf shape and color are available (Figure 4). These colors give copperleaf a bold aesthetic, and overuse of this plant can be overpowering in a landscape. Utilizing two or three plants is usually sufficient for specimen or accent plantings in mixed shrubbery borders. Copperleaf may also be used as a hedge or screen when planted on 3- to 5-foot centers. The dense, multi-branched upright growth habit creates a full shape that can reach 8 to 12 feet in height. The upright and side branches eventually droop, and the plant can spread to about 8 feet wide. The 8- to 12-inch long unusual fuzzy, catkin-like flowers hang pendulously from leaf axils (Figure 5). Copperleaf plants occasionally need shaping to maintain a neat appearance.



Figure 2. Leaf—*Acalypha wilkesiana*: copperleaf.
Credit: Edward F. Gilman, UF/IFAS



Figure 3. Leaf—*Acalypha wilkesiana*: copperleaf.
Credit: Keighly Graves, UF/IFAS



Figure 1. Full Form—*Acalypha wilkesiana* 'Rosea': copperleaf.

Credit: Keighly Graves, UF/IFAS



Figure 4. Foliage—*Acalypha wilkesiana*: copperleaf.
Credit: Keighly Graves, UF/IFAS



Figure 5. Flower—*Acalypha wilkesiana* 'Java White':
copperleaf.
Credit: Keighly Graves, UF/IFAS

General Information

Scientific name: *Acalypha wilkesiana*

Previous name(s): *Acalypha amentacea* subsp. *wilkesiana*

Pronunciation: ack-uh-LIFE-uh wilk-see-AY-nuh

Common name(s): copperleaf, Jacob's coat, Wilkes' copperleaf

Family: *Euphorbiaceae*

Plant type: shrub

USDA hardiness zones: 9B through 11B (Figures 6 and 7)

USDA Hardiness Zones 9B-11A

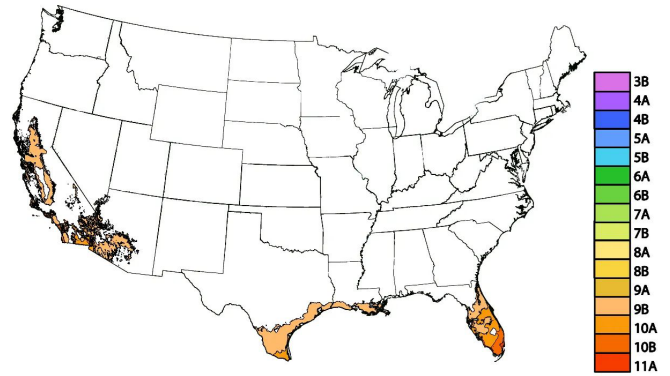


Figure 6. Shaded area represents potential planting zone—USDA Hardiness Zones 9B-11A; 11B within planting zone but not pictured on map.

Credit: This map is based on the 2023 USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map. Visit

<https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/> for specific zone information.

USDA Hardiness Zones 9B-11A

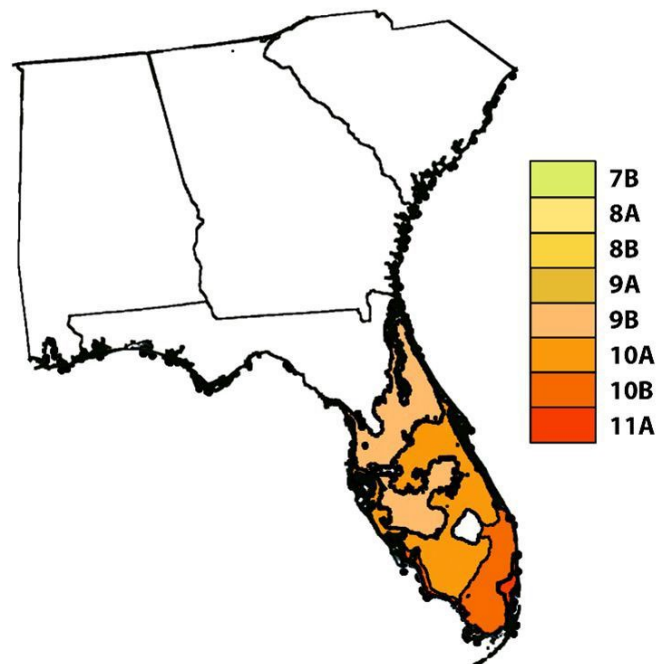


Figure 7. Shaded area represents potential planting zone in the SE Region—USDA Hardiness Zones 9B-11A; 11B within planting zone but not pictured on map.

Credit: This map is based on the 2023 USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map. Visit

<https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/> for specific zone information.

Planting month for zone 9B: year-round

Planting month for zones 10 and 11: year-round

Origin: not native to North America

Invasive potential: not considered a problem species at this time and may be recommended by UF/IFAS faculty (reassess in 10 years)

Uses: hedge; border; mass planting; container or above-ground planter; screen; accent

Availability: generally available in many areas within its hardiness range

Description

Height: 8 to 12 feet

Spread: 6 to 8 feet

Plant habit: round; upright

Plant density: dense

Growth rate: fast

Texture: coarse

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate

Leaf type: simple

Leaf margin: dentate

Leaf shape: reniform

Leaf venation: pinnate

Leaf type and persistence: evergreen; showy

Leaf color: bronze to muted red; **maroon**; pink; orange; yellow; green; white; dependent upon cultivar selection (Table 1)

Leaf blade length: 4 to 8 inches

Fall color: no fall color change

Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: red; yellow; green

Flower characteristic: summer flowering

Fruit

Fruit shape: capsule

Fruit length: less than 1 inch

Fruit cover: dry or hard

Fruit color: red

Fruit characteristic: inconspicuous and not showy

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: not particularly showy; typically multi-trunked or clumping stems

Current year stem/twig color: green

Current year stem/twig thickness: medium

Culture

Light requirement: plant grows in partial shade; plant grows in full sun

Soil tolerances: **acidic**; slightly alkaline; sand; loam; occasionally wet

Drought tolerance: moderate

Soil salt tolerance: unknown

Plant spacing: 36 to 60 inches

Other

Roots: usually not a problem

Winter interest: plant has winter interest due to unusual form and colorful and/or variegated evergreen foliage

Pest resistance: long-term health usually not affected by pests

Use and Management

The upright, rounded shape of the copperleaf plant makes it well-suited to be utilized as a hedge or screen in the landscape. It may require additional pruning to maintain size and shape when used in this way. Copperleaf is also well-suited as a border or accent in the landscape as well as container plantings. Copperleaf gives a bold aesthetic to the landscape when planted en masse, and care should be taken to blend the elements and colors in the landscape.

Copperleaf thrives in full sun, frost-free locations. Planting in partial shade will cause copperleaf to reduce its lateral growth, causing a less-full specimen. The colorful foliage will become more intense with increased light levels. While tolerant of drought, it looks best when provided

with regular watering during drought conditions.
Copperleaf grows in a wide variety of garden soils.

Propagation is by air-layering or cuttings.

Design Considerations


The intense colors of copperleaf foliage make for a striking display in the landscape, so it should be used with care. One to three plants carefully located for a dramatic focal point is the best use of the plant. Red shows best in full or part sun and would pair well with shrubs with medium green or dark green foliage. Small shrubs and groundcover plants with large dark green, glossy leaves would also contrast well with the foliage of the copperleaf plant. Pair copperleaf with plants that have simple forms but contrasting texture, such as mounding grasses with narrow strap blades, or clumping form with wide-blade smooth foliage.

Pests and Diseases

Aphids, mites, whitefly, and scales are pests of copperleaf plants. No diseases of major concern.

Table 1. Popular copperleaf cultivars in the industry, and their size and notable traits.

Cultivar Name	Cultivar Image	Size (H x W)	Notable Traits
'Blaze'		3-4' H x 3-4' W	Medium growth habit, copper foliage with pinkish-white margins
'Java White'		2-4' H x 2-4' W	Yellow, white, and green mottled foliage
'Kona Gold'		Up to 10 H x 10 W	Light green, dark green, and yellow foliage
'Louisiana Red'		6-8' H x 4-6' W	Shiny, glabrous burgundy-red to bronze foliage

Cultivar Name	Cultivar Image	Size (H x W)	Notable Traits
'Tricolor'		3-6' W x 3-6' H	Foliage is mottled red, green, and yellow in coloration
Photo Credits: 'Blaze': Wyatt Richardson; 'Java White': Keighly Graves, UF/IFAS; 'Kona Gold': Khalril via Adobe Stock; 'Louisiana Red': jobi_pro via Adobe Stock; 'Tricolor': Getting Green Plant Service			

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