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Quadrella jamaicensis: Jamaican Caper[1]

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Introduction

Jamaican caper (*Quadrella jamaicensis*) is a small evergreen tree native to parts of coastal south Florida and the Keys, as well as parts of Central America and the Caribbean. This large shrub to small tree may reach a height of 15 feet and spread of 12 feet (Figure 1). The evergreen leaves of the Jamaica caper are light green above, with fine brown scales below (Figure 2). These glossy, oval leaves are folded together when they first emerge and give the plant's new growth a bronze appearance. The leaves also have a notched tip. Twigs are brownish gray and pubescent (Figure 3). Jamaica caper flowers have very showy two-inch-long purple stamens, white anthers, and white petals that turn to pink after opening (Figure 4). The inflorescence is composed of terminal clusters consisting of 3 to 10 individual flowers. The fruits are 3- to 8-inch-long cylindrical pods containing small brown seeds that are embedded in a scarlet pulp (Figure 5). This plant is called the Jamaican caper as it is in the same plant family as the culinary caper plant (Capparaceae). This plant is well-suited for a variety of uses in the landscape, including near a deck or patio, as a screen or border plant, as a specimen, as a part of a coastal landscape, and the plant attracts butterflies.



Figure 1. Full form—*Quadrella jamaicensis*: Jamaican caper.
Credit: © udarian, some rights reserved (CC BY-NC) via iNaturalist



Figure 2. Leaf—*Quadrella jamaicensis*: Jamaican caper.
Credit: © Oscar Johnson, some rights reserved (CC BY-NC-ND) via iNaturalist



Figure 3. Stem—*Quadrella jamaicensis*: Jamaican caper.
Credit: © fredjburton, some rights reserved (CC BY-NC) via iNaturalist



Figure 4. Flower—*Quadrella jamaicensis*: Jamaican caper.
Credit: © maddielips2005, some rights reserved (CC BY-NC) via iNaturalist



Figure 5. Fruit—*Quadrella jamaicensis*: Jamaican caper.
Credit: © Bill Pranty, some rights reserved (CC BY-NC) via iNaturalist

General Information

Scientific name: *Quadrella jamaicensis*

Previous name(s): *Capparis cynophallophora*

Pronunciation: kwa-DRELL-ah jam-ache-ken-sis

Common name(s): Jamaican caper

Family: *Capparaceae*

Plant type: large shrub; small tree

USDA hardiness zones: 10A through 11B (Figures 6 and 7)

USDA Hardiness Zones 10A-11A

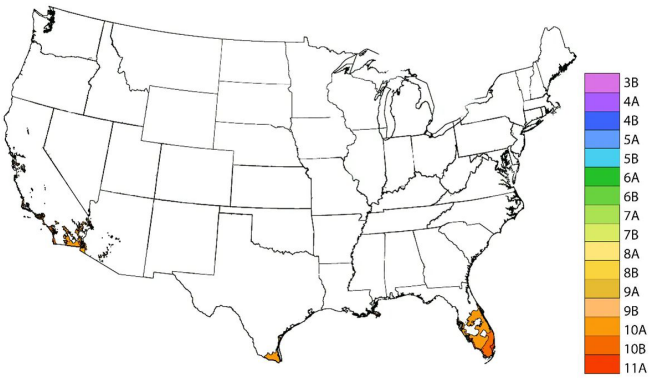


Figure 6. Shaded area represents potential planting zone—USDA Hardiness Zones 10A–11A; 11B within planting zone but not pictured on map.
Credit: This map is based on the 2023 USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map. Visit https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/ for specific zone information.

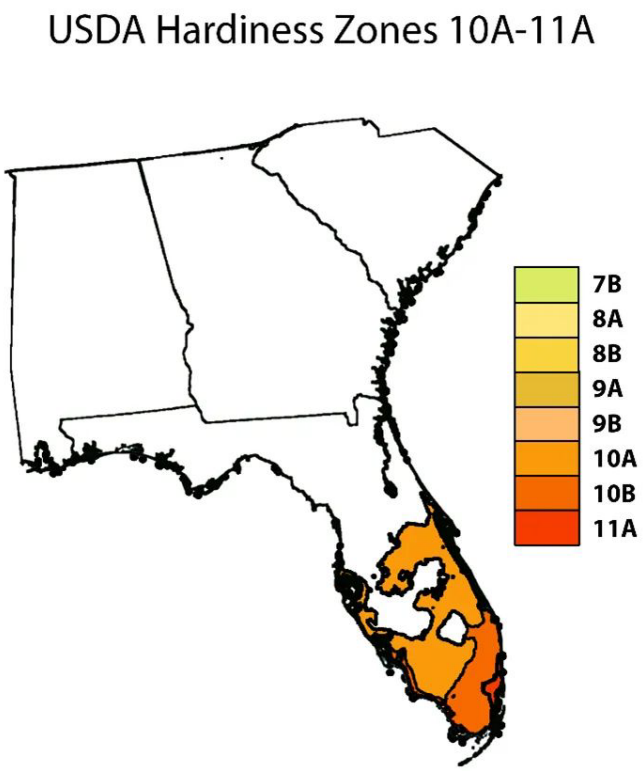


Figure 7. Shaded area represents potential planting zone in the SE Region—USDA Hardiness Zones 10A–11; 11B within planting zone but not pictured on map.
Credit: This map is based on the 2023 USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map. Visit https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/ for specific zone information.

Planting month for zones 10 and 11: year-round

Origin: native to Florida

Invasive potential: not known to be invasive

Uses: near a deck or patio; screen; border; specimen; coastal landscaping; attracts butterflies; recommended for buffer strips around parking lots or for median strip plantings in the highway; small parking lot islands (< 100 square feet in size); medium-sized parking lot islands (100–200 square feet in size); large parking lot islands (> 200 square feet in size)

Availability: generally available in many nurseries which specialize in Florida native plants

Description

Height: 6 to 15 feet

Spread: 8 to 12 feet

Plant habit: vase shape

Plant density: dense

Growth rate: slow

Texture: medium

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate

Leaf type: simple

Leaf margin: entire

Leaf shape: obovate

Leaf venation: pinnate

Leaf type and persistence: evergreen

Leaf blade length: 2 to 4 inches

Leaf color: green

Fall color: no fall color change

Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: white; pink

Flower characteristic: spring flowering; showy

Fruit

Fruit shape: pod or pod-like

Fruit length: 3 to 6 inches

Fruit cover: dry or hard

Fruit color: red; brown when mature

Fruit characteristic: showy

Trunk and Branches

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

Current year stem/twig color: brown

Current year stem/twig thickness: medium

Culture

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

Soil tolerances: acidic; slightly alkaline; sand; loam; clay

Drought tolerance: high

Soil salt tolerances: good

Plant spacing: 36 to 60 inches

Other

Roots: usually not a problem

Winter interest: evergreen foliage

Pest resistance: no serious pests are normally seen on the plant

Use and Management

Jamaican caper should be planted in full sun to partial shade in the landscape. It is adaptive to a wide variety of soil conditions, provided that soil is well drained. Jamaican caper is a hardy plant, as it has moderate to high drought tolerance, and high wind tolerance. This plant is well-suited for coastal landscaping, may be used as a screen or border; or makes a nice specimen plant with its showy flowers and seed pods. This is the larval host plant of the Florida white butterfly (*Appias drusilla*). This plant is cold tolerant to 28°F.

Jamaican caper can be utilized as an understory tree in the partial shade. Train the plant into a tree by removing low, drooping branches, and heading upright branches to thicken their diameter. It can also be clipped into a hedge or tall screen to block an undesirable view.

Propagated by seeds.

Design Considerations

Jamaican caper is a structural evergreen valued for its solid, year-round presence in the landscape. Its dense, naturally rounded form and leathery, dark green leaves create a clean, elegant look that provides an excellent backdrop for other plants. While its fragrant, spidery flowers are beautiful but fleeting, more lasting interest comes from the long seed pods that split to reveal a bright red interior. It can be maintained as a dense shrub or limbed up to form a small patio tree.

Its slow growth and neat habit make it ideal as a specimen plant or in a foundation planting. As a standalone focal point, its symmetrical form anchors a small yard or garden bed. It also forms an excellent low-maintenance informal screen or hedge; for this use, space plants 5–6 feet apart. Its high tolerance for wind and salt spray makes it a first-rate choice for coastal sites.

To complement the Jamaican caper's dense form, pair it with plants that offer contrasting textures.

Planting coontie (*Zamia integrifolia*) at its base provides textural contrast. As fellow Florida natives, both are extremely tough and drought-tolerant, thriving in similar conditions to create a cohesive, resilient combination.

Alternative Palettes

Coastal mix: For a tough beachside planting, combine it with the silvery foliage of silver buttonwood (*Conocarpus erectus*), the fine texture of Florida Privet (*Forestiera segregate*), and drifts of Muhly Grass (*Muhlenbergia capillaris*) for autumn color.

Lush hammock style: In partial shade, pair it with the layered foliage of wild coffee (*Psychotria nervosa*), the upright form of marlberry (*Ardisia escallonioides*), and the pollinator-attracting blooms of firebush (*Hamelia patens*) or beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*).

Pollinator focus: To draw in butterflies and bees, tuck in clumps of blue porterweed (*Stachytarpheta jamaicensis*) or native lantana (*Lantana depressa* or *Lantana involucrata*) around the base.

Pests and Diseases

No pests or diseases are of major concern.

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