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Hibiscus cannabinus: Kenaf[1]

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Introduction

This publication is intended to serve as a source of general information about kenaf (*Hibiscus cannabinus*) for individuals interested in noncommercial usage of the crop. Kenaf is a tropical fiber crop believed to be native to regions of northeastern and central Africa. Being well adapted to the high temperatures and humidity of tropical climates, kenaf is a viable crop in Florida. Commercial production of kenaf is restricted in south Florida and some of central Florida because the crop is a host of the pink bollworm, which threatens Florida cotton production. At this time, growers must obtain a permit from FDACS to produce kenaf south of Highway 60.

General Information

Scientific name: *Hibiscus cannabinus*

Pronunciation: hye-BISS-kus can-NA-bih-nus

Common name: kenaf

Family: Malvaceae

Plant type: herbaceous annual

USDA hardiness zones: 6a–11b

Cold hardy: not freeze tolerant

Origin: Africa

UF/IFAS Invasive Assessment Status: low invasion risk (UF/IFAS 2018)

Attractant: iguanas and various insect and bird pollinators

Uses: landscape border

Availability: not available in nurseries; seed is difficult to acquire

Description

Height: average; 9–14 ft but up to 20 ft

Habit: broadleaf, herbaceous (non-woody) plant

Plant density: thin, unbranched stalk; needs to be sown densely to act as a border or cover

Growth rate: fast

Hazard: none

Foliage

Leaf type: varies with age and cultivar; serrated edges that can be unlobed, partially lobed, or severely lobed

Leaf size: 10–15 cm

Leaf color: vibrant green

Flower

Flower color: cream with maroon center

Inflorescence: indeterminate flowering from leaf nodes

Photoperiod: short-day

Stalk

Stalk characteristics: cylindrical, reaching 1–5 cm in diameter, with thorns of varying sizes; composed of bast fibers (bark) and core fibers

Culture

Light requirement: full sun to partial shade

Soil tolerance: extremely tolerant of a wide range of soils

Drought tolerance: high

Salt tolerance: high

Soil pH: acidic to alkaline

Nutritional requirements: low

Hurricane tolerance: susceptible to damage from strong winds

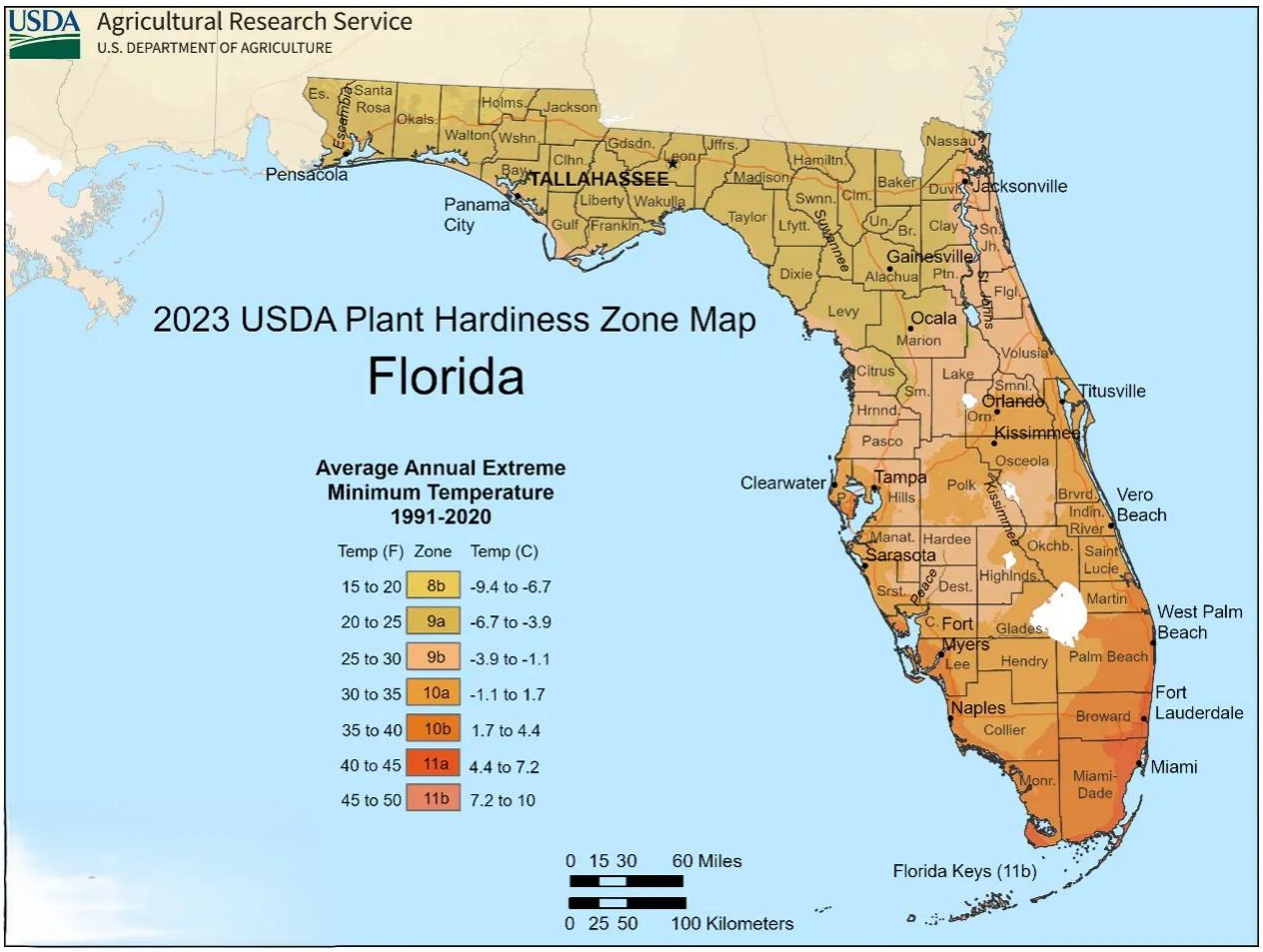


Figure 1. USDA hardiness zones for Florida. For alternative viewing, visit the interactive 2023 USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map.
Credit: U.S. Department of Agriculture.



Figure 2. Kenaf 'Whitten' seeds.
Credit: Karen Williams, UF/IFAS.



Figure 3 . Kenaf emerging seedlings.
Credit: Karen Williams, UF/IFAS.



Figure 4 . Field-grown kenaf crop.
Credit: Mica McMillan, UF/IFAS.



Figure 5. Kenaf seed pods and thorns.
Credit: Karen Williams, UF/IFAS.



Figure 6. Kenaf flowers.
Credit: Mica McMillan, UF/IFAS.

Other **Human hazards:** none

Uses and Management

When planted densely, kenaf forms stands similar to bamboo that can act as borders and privacy barriers in the landscape.

Florida Administrative Code 5B-52 prohibits commercial production of kenaf in Pinellas, Hillsborough, Hardee, Highlands, Okeechobee, and St. Lucie counties, as well as all counties south thereof. This area is designated as a regulated area. Noncommercial kenaf shall not be produced without a permit.

Pests and Diseases

Pests: boll weevil (*Anthonomus grandis*), cotton seed bug (*Oxycarenus hyalinipennis*), pink bollworm (*Pectinophora gossypiella*), and green iguana (*Iguana iguana*)

Diseases: Fusarium wilt, root rot, bacterial wilt, leaf blight, and anthracnose



Figure 7. The green iguana (*Iguana iguana*) has eaten a stand of kenaf at the seedling stage.
Credit: Karen Williams, UF/IFAS.

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Further Reading

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