Black-eyed Susan Vine, Thunbergia alata

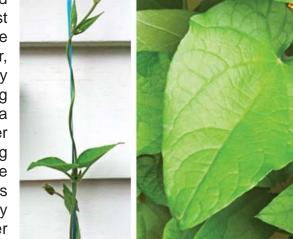


Thunbergia alata is a fast-growing, free-flowering vine.

Black-eyed Susan vine is commonly grown in the Midwest as a season annual to provide color in a vertical setting. This plant, *Thunbergia alata*, is actually a tender evergreen perennial in the acanthus family (Acanthaceae) native from tropical East Africa to eastern South Africa that is hardy only in zone 9 and 10 (and is completely unrelated to *Rudbeckia hirta*, an herbaceous annual or short-lived perennial in the daisy family (Compositae) native to north America also commonly called black-eyed Susan). But because it grows and flowers relatively quickly it is often used as an annual ornamental garden plant in cooler areas. It should be used with caution in frost-free areas as it has become invasive in many warm locations throughout the world.

This trailing or twining vine grows rapidly from seeds, reaching up to 8 feet in a single season under ideal conditions, but more often

only 3 to 5 feet in the Midwest (and much more in frost free climates). The plant is a rambler, climbing by twining (growing in a spiral up a support) rather than by clinging



This vine grows by twisting around supports (L) and had heart-shaped, softly hairy leaves (R).

or producing tendrils as some other vines do. The opposite, oval to triangular or heart-shaped leaves grow up to 3 inches long on winged petioles. They are soft and hairy, dull dark green on the upper surface and pale green with prominent veins below, with slightly toothed margins.

Showy flowers in shades of orange and yellow are produced singly in the leaf axils. Each 1½ inch wide flower emerges from a small yellow-green calyx enclosed in 2 large, ridged, hairy, green bracts. The trumpet-shaped corolla opens flat with five overlapping petals surrounding the brownish-maroon center.









Showy flowers (RC, from side and R from front) emerge (LC) from hairy bracts (L).

Plants bloom from mid-summer to frost, often with the best display in late summer. The species typically has brilliant orange flowers, but there are cultivars in pastels and white as well. Butterflies, bees and hummingbirds will visit the flowers. Seeds are often produced late in the season. The fruit resembles a bird's head with a round base and a long 'beak'. Each fruit contains 2 or 4 semicircular, reticulate seeds.







Pollinated flowers develop a fruit (LC) enclosed in the green bracts (L), which ripens and dries (RC) to a tan color.



Each fruit releases a number of reticulate seeds.



Black-eyed Susan vine will quickly cover small structures.

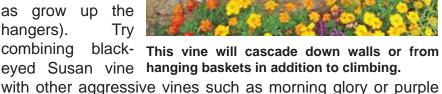


Cultivars offer different colors than orange.

Black-eved Susan vine does best when allowed to grow on some sort of support structure instead of just rambling through adjacent plants, although it can be used as a ground cover. It makes a dramatic focal point when grown on a tall tuteur

hyacinth bean. The orange or yellow flowers would contrast

or other decorative support in a border or bed, will cover a fence, arbor or trellis along a wall for decoration or to create a quick privacy screen, and will cascade from a hanging basket (as well as grow up the hangers). Trv combining black-



nicely with purple or blue flowers. such salvia as or ageratum, or purple-foliaged plants (such as Persian shield or purple heart) adjacent planted to the vine's trellis. Use hot-colored flowers such as tall



White, orange and yellow Thunbergia alata in a large container.



perennial and will grow very dense.

marigolds, or bright yellow celosia for a completely different look. Or combine them with bright red cannas and large elephant ears for a tropical look. This vine can be used in a large container with a small trellis, and can be grown as an indoor plant (although it will likely need to be trained and pruned to keep it at a manageable size). Plants in containers will bloom over winter if kept in a sunny place and night temperatures are above 60 degrees.

In frost-free climates this vine is Thunbergia alata grows best in rich, moist soil in full sun. It tolerates partial

shade but flowering may be reduced. Seed can be sown directly where the plants are to be grown once soil temperature reaches 60F in the spring, but transplants give better results in the short growing season of the upper Midwest. Plant near the trellis, fence, or other support structure, 14-16"



Black-eyed Susan vine is most often propagated from seed.

apart. Fertilize every 2 to 3 weeks when in bloom if grown in containers. Outdoors problems, but if grown indoors it is readily infested by spider mites and whiteflies.

blackeyed Susan vine has few pest

vertical spaces with color. This plant is most commonly propagated from seed (although softwood cuttings can be taken or stems layered, too, but plants grown from seed tend to be more vigorous). Start seeds indoors 6 to 8 weeks before the average last frost, and plant outside once all danger of frost has passed and night temperatures remain above 50F. Soaking the seeds in warm water overnight before sowing

will speed germination. Press the seeds into the soil, covering completely. Seeds should germinate in 10-21 days. Plants grown in containers can be overwintered indoors in a warm, very bright room.

Often just the basic orange type is offered for sale as plants or seeds, but there are many cultivars. Some of the more common or interesting ones available include:

- 'African Sunset' includes shades from cream to brick red
- 'Arizona Dark Red' has intense deep orange-red flowers
- 'Blushing Susie' is a mix in shades of apricot and rose and dark centers
- 'Bright Eyes' has all white flowers
- 'Canary Eyes' offers yellow flowers with a dark center
- Lemon A-Peel[™] has bright yellow flowers with a very dark center
- Orange A-Peel® PP14767 has bright orange flowers
- 'Orange Wonder' all bright orange without the dark center



The vine will quickly fill narrow

different. There are manv cultivars available.

- 'Pure White' all white flowers
- 'Raspberry Smoothie' has pale lilac-pink flowers and more greygreen foliage
- 'Spanish Eyes' is a mixture of flower colors in more muted shades of apricot, terra cotta, salmon, rose and ivory, all with a dark center
- Superstar Orange' has extra large, bright orange flowers
- 'Susie' mix includes orange, yellow and white flowers with or without contrasting dark eyes
- Susan Mahr, University of Wisconsin Madison



A yellow cultivar.

Additional Information:

- Thunbergia alata on the Missouri Botanic Garden's Kemper Center for Home Gardening website at www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/PlantFinder/PlantFinderDetails.aspx?kempercode=a552
- Thunbergia alata on the Floridata website at www.floridata.com/Plants/Acanthaceae/ Thunbergia%20alata/1059
- Thunbergia on the Cornell University website at www.gardening.cornell.edu/homegardening/scene82fe.html