

Thomasia for the garden.

By John Knight

At our November meeting, members were introduced to *Thomasia*, a Genus of 40 species of dwarf to medium shrubs confined almost exclusively to the south west corner of Western Australia, with only one species extending to South Australia and western Victoria.

It seems that few species have made it to cultivation, which is a shame as *Thomasias* are generally well behaved garden plants, with softly hairy leaves. Foliage is usually maintained to ground level. As our gardens mature, there is a need for plants which will fill difficult spots under trees and large shrubs, and *Thomasias* will fit the bill.

Some species worth considering:

Thomasia angustifolia, Narrow-leaved Paper Flower, a small erect to spreading shrub to 1.2m

Foliage is more open than in larger leaved species, and the prominent mauve to purple flowers are well displayed in terminal racemes from late winter through spring.

Thomasia foliosa, Leafy Paper Flower, is also a small shrub to 1m, but spreading, up to 2m in old plants, but plants can be maintained much smaller than this with regular pruning. As its name suggests, this species is densely foliated, but has proved very reliable in cultivation, especially under established trees. Flowers are small, and often white to light mauve, so are not as prominent as other species, but the attractive foliage more than compensates. Old plants can be rejuvenated by hard pruning during spring or autumn.

Thomasia grandiflora, Large Flowered Paper Flower, is usually wider than high, spreading to 1.5m but can easily be controlled to maintain a compact habit. Foliage is narrow, 25 – 50mm long but often less than 10mm wide, and the large pinkish mauve flowers, to 30mm across are very prominently held in terminal racemes from mid-winter through spring.

Thomasia laxiflora can grow to 1.2 x 1.5m, and is a small shrub which has been widely grown for its spectacular floral display. Heart shaped, deep green leaves 30 – 70mm x 20 – 40mm are quite dense and very hairy. During spring and early summer the many – flowered racemes of pinkish purple flowers cover the plants, almost hiding the foliage.

Thomasia pauciflora, Few Flowered Paper Flower is usually a more upright shrub, growing to 2m x 1 – 1.5m, with many branches. Leaves are dull green and softly hairy on both surfaces, up to 50mm long and 10 – 15mm wide. Despite the common name, this species is usually quite a prolific flowerer, with many mauve or white flowers from winter through summer. Pruning is beneficial, and the plant makes a very good hedge in shaded sites.

Thomasia petalocalyx is the most widespread species, growing in WA SA and western Victoria, usually growing in coastal heaths and woodlands. Plants can grow to 1.5m x 2m, but is usually much smaller, and in cultivation can be kept to less than a metre with regular pruning. Lanceolate foliage is pale green and densely hairy, 20 – 50mm long x 5 – 20mm wide, held on long stalks. Flowers are pink to purple, about 10mm across, profuse and well displayed from late winter to the following autumn. Plants do best in shaded sites, but will tolerate sunny positions.

Thomasia pygmaea, Tiny Paper Flower, is probably the most widely grown species. It is a very attractive dwarf shrub, growing to 30cm high and 50 – 70cm wide. Leaves are ovate to almost rounded, small, to about 10mm, greyish-green, covered with many brown scales.

Foliage is usually not dense, which allows the mauve to purplish-pink flowers to be conspicuously displayed from late winter to summer. Individual flowers are about 15mm across, held on slender stems longer than the leaves. Plants prefer a semi-shaded site, but will adapt to full sun if the soil does not dry out. It is an ideal container plant, requiring little maintenance.

Thomasia quercifolia, Oak – leaved Paper Flower is a spreading, small shrub to 1m high and up to 1.5m wide. The sparse foliage is very attractive, softly hairy, the leaves about 20 – 30mm long and 10 – 20mm wide, deeply 3 lobed, and further divided or toothed, hence the common name. Although small, to about 10mm across, the pinkish purple flowers are well displayed on long stalks, held outside the foliage during spring and early summer. Plants do best in shaded sites but will tolerate some sun.

Plants are not often available in general nurseries, so why not propagate our own? There are a few species being grown by members, and as always they would be happy to supply some cutting material for others to have a go.

Propagation of *Thomasia* can be by either seed or more usually cuttings.

Seed collected and sown fresh will usually germinate successfully. This can be assisted by soaking the seed in hot, but not boiling water for up to 24 hours.

Cuttings are taken of current season's new growth. Pieces with about six leaf nodes are ideal. The stems should be still green, not yet turning brown. These soft pieces will wilt easily, so the cuttings are best placed in a shaded area. As the cuttings are usually very hairy, regular misting of the foliage should be avoided to prevent moulds growing. Large leaves can be reduced in size to prevent the cutting wilting. In selecting suitable cuttings, be aware that material with flowering nodes will usually not root.

Reference; Encyclopaedia of Australian Plants suitable for cultivation Vol 9 (2010) Elliot & Jones