

Passionflowers tell tales in summer

By Arthur O. Tucker

Delaware State University

In the late summer, my garden in central Kent County is covered with the flowers of passionflowers (*Passiflora* spp. and hybrids).

The majority of the 500 or so species of passionflowers grow as perennial vines at the edge of tropical forests, but Delaware has two native species, the maypop (*P. incarnata*), with its lavender and white flowers, and the tiny yellow passionflower (*P. lutea*).

In addition, a few tropical species and their hybrids are hardy in Delaware in protected areas, such as the blue passionflower (*P. caerulea*), of Brazil and Argentina, and 'Incense,' a hybrid of our maypop with a Brazilian species (*P. cincinnata*). The rest of the captivatingly beautiful passionflowers I raise in pots on small trellises and either treat them as annuals or struggle to winter them over.

The "passion" here is the passion of Jesus on the cross. The scientific name *Passiflora* is derived from the Latin *flos passionis*, a translation of the name *flora della passione*, the Italian name applied to the fancied resemblance of the floral parts to aspects of the Crucifixion. This was also used by the Spanish priests to explain the Crucifixion to the natives of the New World and is a lesson in botany as well as religion: the three stigmas and styles equal three nails, ovary is the hammer, five stamens are five wounds, corona is the crown of thorns, lighter colored ring in corona is a halo, five sepals and five petals are 10 apostles present at the Crucifixion (minus Peter who denied him and Judas who betrayed him), three bracts equal the trinity, leaves are the hands of



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his accusers, tendrils are whips and scourges, and white lining of fruit is the host. If the flower is sliced longitudinally, there is an empty tomb.

Unfortunately, both the maypop and the yellow passionflower have become weeds in my garden. The maypop tunnels under the soil, popping up 20 feet away (after traveling under a cement driveway), while the small, succulent black fruits of the yellow passionflower are eagerly eaten by birds, and so seedlings crop up everywhere!

Despite this, I cannot stop raising passionflowers. The edible passion fruit (*P. edulis*) is supposed to be marginally hardy to Delaware, perhaps something

for me to grow in the future, snuggled up next to the house for protection. Maybe then I can raise my own passion fruit juice to make an authentic pavlova (a dessert of egg whites and whipped cream, topped with fruits) like our Australian friends have made for us with fresh passion fruit juice.

Editor's note: On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 302-857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the Herbarium, and call 302-857-6408 (Dr. Arthur Tucker) for more information about this article.