Skullcap

Helmet skullcap

Hairstreak on Helmet skullcap

1–2 ft
Nectar

For such a diminutive wildflower, Helmet skullcap (*Scutellaria integrifolia*) makes a large impact when it blooms in late spring and summer. Also known as Common skullcap, it is ideal for a wildflower border or nestled within a pond or rock garden. Although a short-lived perennial, its adaptability is contributing to its surge in popularity with home gardeners. *Scutellaria* is Latin for dish, possibly describing the lower plate-like petal; and *integrifolia* refers to its smooth leaf margins.

The natural distribution of *Scutellaria* extends to all of Florida except the southernmost tip. It is frequently found in the Panhandle, and in North and Central Florida in the moist soils of sandhills, pine flatwoods and upland mixed forests, as well as along marsh and swamp edges. Skullcap is also found through most of the eastern U.S.

A closely related species, Florida scrub skullcap (*Scutellaria arenicola*) can be distinguished by its crenate leaf margins. The other nine native Florida skullcap species are only rarely or occasionally found in their habitats.

Description

Helmet skullcap is a 12- to 24-inch perennial that dies back in winter. It begins as a basal rosette of bright green, arrow-shaped leaves with coarsely toothed margins. From the rosette, many branched stems emerge. Stem leaves vary from elliptical to arrow-shaped and are oppositely arranged. Upper leaves are more narrow and have entire margins.

Flowers are two-lipped and resemble snapdragon blooms. They occur on terminal racemes and are very showy with colors ranging from sky blue to violet. The lower lip consists of three fused lobes with white splotched centers extending down the throat. A dark strip guides insects toward desirable nectar. Upper petals are fused and curved, forming a small hood or helmet-like structure. Flowers are born in the axils of the bract-like upper leaves.

Butterflies and bees

Helmet skullcap flowers are visited by a wide range of bees whose bodies can fit between the lower and upper lips in order to reach the nectar. This includes leafcutter, carder and cuckoo bees, as well as some bumble bees. Sweat bees are also known to visit Helmet skullcap, but they are nectar robbers and will pierce the base of the corolla to access nectar. Like many other species in the Lamiaceae (mint) family, Helmet skullcap flowers are only visited sporadically by butterflies. Species known to utilize Helmet skullcap include Gulf fritillary, Spicebush swallowtail and Eastern black swallowtail.

Planting

This lovely little wildflower can be introduced into your garden anytime using plants or seeds. It produces a large amount of seeds and seedlings, so plantings will naturally and quickly increase in size.

Seeds

Seeds are small, shiny and black and are produced in nutlets. They are currently not available commercially. Seeds are mature when the nutlet coat turns light brown and becomes papery. The plant may hold flowers and seeds at the same time. Dried seeds can be stored up to six months then sown when temperatures reach 70 degrees. Germination may take up to 30 days.

Plants

Nurseries that specialize in native plants sell Helmet skullcap almost year-round. It is generally available in 4-inch or 1-gallon pots.

Care

Excess seedlings can be easily removed or transplanted into small pots. To avoid having to weed out seedlings, prune plants back after flowering to limit seed production. Disease and pests are not a problem with this wildflower.

Site conditions

Prized for its early spring flowering, Helmet skullcap is great in the front of a mixed wildflower bed. This adaptable plant can be used in well-drained to moist soil and is reported to be somewhat drought tolerant. A pH of 5-6.5 is ideal. It is best suited to sunny or lightly shaded sites. Plants will be dormant in winter, dying back to the rootstock. Helmet skullcap is not salt tolerant.

Hardiness zones

Helmet skullcap is best suited for zones 8A–9B.
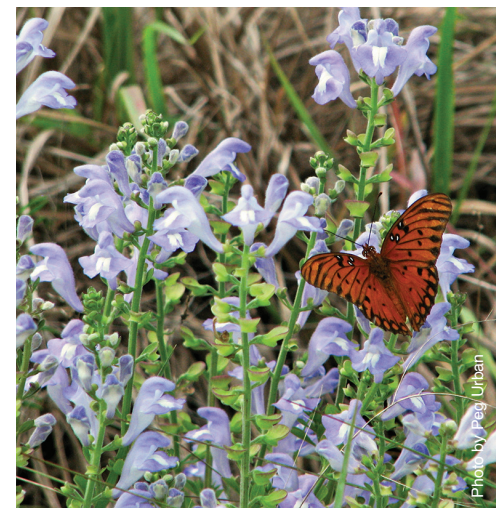
Gulf fritillary on Helmet skullcap