



# Native Plant Highlight: Coral Honeysuckle

## *Lonicera sempervirens*

by Heather Brasell

This article is courtesy of the Coast Plain Chapter of the Georgia Native Plant Society. The GNPS is dedicated to promoting the stewardship and conservation of Georgia's native plants and their habitats. The Coastal Plain Chapter serves the people in the Coastal Plain ecoregion of Georgia. This includes all areas south of the Fall Line in middle Georgia, from the Alabama and Florida borders to the Atlantic ocean. To learn more, please visit their [website](#).

When I first came to Georgia 33 years ago, I knew nothing about local plants. We had a lot of Japanese honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*) in the yard. Although the flowers are beautiful, I learned the plant is invasive and I promptly started to pull it up wherever I saw it. Then I came across a vine that looked a bit different. The leaves had a waxy, bluish color and the terminal leaves were fused or united, surrounding the stem (perfoliate leaf). There were no flowers on the plant at that time. I decided not to pull it up until I identified it.

Some time later, my husband and I went to the Woodbine Crawfish Festival in Woodbine, GA. At the welcome desk, they were handing out free seedlings of "woodbine." I recognized my mystery vine immediately. Of course, they had photos of the flowers and lots of information to share. I later found out that woodbine is an alternative common name for coral honeysuckle. I also learned it is a native plant in the same genus as the invasive Japanese honeysuckle.

Back at my home, the coral honeysuckle continued to spread along the ground, but I never saw flowers. After a few years, it reached some

shrubs and started to climb. Only then did it start flowering. I have since learned that it is quite common for vines to flower only after they get up off the ground.

### Description

Coral honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*) was the 2019 Plant of the Year for Georgia Native Plant Society. Other common names include trumpet honeysuckle, scarlet honeysuckle, and woodbine. "Sempervirens" means evergreen. Plants are evergreen to semi-evergreen throughout the US (hardiness zones 1-8), but are deciduous in colder climates.

Coral honeysuckle is a perennial, woody, twining vine growing to 20 ft, trailing across the ground and climbing shrubs and trees. Bark is orange-brown in color, and papery and exfoliating in texture.

Simple, opposite leaves are medium-sized (1-3 inches long) and oval to elliptical in shape. They are glossy green on top and silvery green underneath. Both surfaces are smooth and waxy, especially on new growth. Margins are entire and

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slightly rolled down. Leaf tips are blunt or have a short point. Terminal leaves are joined at the base so they completely surround the stem (perfoliate).

The vine starts producing showy flowers as early as January and are one of the first plants providing nectar for hummingbirds. Flowers are most abundant from March to June, but continue intermittently for a longer period. Flowers grow in several whorled clusters at the end of new growth. Individual trumpet-shaped flowers, about 2 inches long, are red on the outside and yellow inside. Five small lobes at the tip of the tube open to expose the stamens and stigma. Fruits are bright red berries, about a quarter of an inch in diameter.



### Natural Habitats

Coral honeysuckle is widespread throughout southeastern US, growing in woodlands, thickets, and fencerows. It can grow in many areas because of its hardiness. It grows in a wide variety of soils, from sandy to clay loam and with a wide range of pH.



Don't confuse this beautiful native honeysuckle with the invasive Japanese honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*). Japanese honeysuckle is in Category 1 in GA Exotic Plant Pest Council's list of invasive plants of concern, indicating it is an exotic plant that is a serious problem in Georgia natural areas by extensively invading natural communities and displacing native species. Japanese honeysuckle has a similar growth habit and distribution. However, the flowers are white, fading to yellow as they age. Leaves are not waxy, are not fused, and lower leaves are lobed or deeply toothed.

### Considerations for Your Garden

This plant is an excellent twining vine for trellises and arbors. It is also effective as ground cover to reduce erosion, although it may not produce flowers on the ground. Because it is evergreen



and flowers for an extended period, followed by production of red berries, it is a visually appealing plant year round.

Coral honeysuckle is a low-maintenance plant. Although it grows in a wide range of soils, it prefers well-drained, slightly acidic soil. It produces abundant flowers in full sun, but fewer flowers in shaded locations. Coral honeysuckle grows quickly without being overly aggressive. You may want to do some pruning to control spread and shape the plant. It is drought tolerant. I have it growing in semi-shaded locations on well-drained sandy soils and I have never had to water it even in the driest of times. It can tolerate poor drainage for short periods, but needs good drainage and adequate circulation to prevent powdery mildew. Coral honeysuckle has few pest or disease

problems, although new shoots may sometimes be attacked by aphids.

It propagates easily from layering. I just pull up the vines lying on the ground to find sections that have already rooted. You can also grow it from cuttings taken during summer and fall from young vines.

To propagate from seeds, collect seeds when they are ripe and clean them to avoid fermentation.



Stratify by storing in sealed containers for at least two months in your refrigerator (34-40 degrees Fahrenheit).

### Benefits

Coral honeysuckle is a wonderful plant for wildlife. It is a host plant for spring azure and snowberry clearwing moths. Flowers provide a nectar source, attracting hummingbirds, bees, and butterflies. Children love to pluck the flowers and suck the nectar from the stem end. In late summer and fall, fruits attract songbirds, including northern bobwhite quail, purple finch, goldfinch, hermit thrush, American robin, northern cardinal, pine siskin, and sparrows.

The flowers are edible. Plant parts have been used as herbal remedies, although I did not research their efficacy. Flowers can be infused into butter, milk, vodka, or any kind of liquid. Infusions can be used to treat sore throats or coughs. Leaves may be dried and smoked for asthma. Bee stings can be treated by chewing the leaves to apply the juice. Other medical benefits have been described for Japanese honeysuckle. Such benefits include colds, flu, bronchitis, pneumonia, tonsillitis, viral infections, and much more. Experimentally, flower extracts lower cholesterol and have antiviral, antibacterial, antioxidant, and tuberculostatic properties. They have at least a dozen antiviral compounds.

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