

# ACALYPHA REPTANS

By Stephanie Jackson

Several species of the genus *Acalypha* have long been popular with gardeners, with one of the most widely grown being *Acalypha hispida*, a shrub that, with its masses of long red catkin-like flowers, is commonly known as 'Red Hot Cats' Tails'.

The many cultivars of *A. wilkesiana*, a shrub with colourful variegated foliage, but insignificant flowers, are often planted to create an attractive hedge, and a species that's equally attractive, although for dramatically different

member of the genus, and when used as a ground cover plant nothing seems beyond its reach.

The genus name of *Acalypha* is derived from a Greek word meaning 'nettle' a reference to the similarity of the plants' leaves to those of that unpleasant weed, the stinging nettle, but in the case of *A. reptans*, the light green, slightly hairy oval leaves, with their serrated margins, are much smaller than those of nettles.

The most attractive feature of this sprawling species is its abili-

with either full sun or partial shade. It grows to a height of around 15cms, and being a plant that puts down roots from every node that comes into contact with the soil, it spreads rapidly and will quickly dominate a garden bed and, if uncontrolled, will smother other low growing plants that are within the territory that it vigorously claims as its own.

In addition to its value as a decorative ground cover, it also acts as a living mulch to suppress weeds and retain soil moisture for larg-



Above: *Acalypha reptans*

reasons, is its diminutive and less familiar relative, *Acalypha reptans*.

Commonly known as 'Cats' Tails', 'Kittens' Tails', 'Dwarf Chenille Plant', and 'Summer Love', it's a low growing evergreen perennial that's the more aggressive

to produce a profusion of fluffy red flowers, which are about 50mm in length, for most of the year.

*A. reptans*, like other members of the genus, does best in moist, relatively fertile, well drained soil, and will thrive and bloom in a location

er plants, and it will thrive and put on a spectacular floral display when grown in a hanging basket or other type of container that allows it to spill over the sides.

This native of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka can tolerate very

light frosts, but is only suitable for outdoor cultivation in sub-tropical and tropical climates. And although it can cope some periods of dry weather during the cooler months of the year, it requires regular watering during prolonged hot and dry periods to guarantee a profusion of its beautiful flowers.

*Acalypha reptans* is highly resistant to diseases and to attacks by insect pests, although its leaves are occasionally damaged by grasshoppers, and for any gardener who's not reluctant to give this rambling plant the chop every now and then, it's a welcome addition to the garden.

**Images:**

Top - *Acalypha hispida*

Bottom - *Acalypha wilkesiana*

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