



Alabama's *TREASURED Forests*  
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P.O. Box 302550  
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# Yellow Jessamine

(*Gelsemium sempervirens*)

By Fred Nation, Environmental Services, Baldwin County

**Y**ellow jessamine is a high-climbing, woody vine that is native to the eastern United States, from Ohio to New Jersey, south to Florida, and west to Oklahoma and east Texas. It occurs throughout Alabama, where it is frequently seen in pine and hardwood forests, as well as on fences, utility poles, and other disturbed sites. Like many attractive native plants, it has several common names, including Carolina jasmine, woodbine, and poor man's rope. The Latin species name, *sempervirens*, literally means 'always alive;' the actual meaning is 'evergreen.'

The leaves are opposite, mostly lance-shaped, to about 4 inches long, one inch wide, and they are evergreen. The flowers, from midwinter into spring, are pleasantly fragrant, bright lemon yellow, about an inch and a half long. In coastal Alabama the flowers can be seen up in the trees as early as mid-January. There is a similar, closely related species that is not as frequent and less widespread: Swamp jessamine (*Gelsemium rankinii*)



Photo by Fred Nation

blooms several weeks later, in much wetter areas than yellow jessamine, and the flowers are not fragrant.

Many published sources have cautioned that *Gelsemium sempervirens* is quite toxic; all parts are said to contain strychnine, which can be fatal if ingested. Children have been poisoned by sucking nectar from the flowers in the mistaken belief that they are honeysuckle. The sap can cause skin irritations in sensitive individuals.

Yellow jessamine is undeniably a handsome

plant, and it is used throughout the south in landscapes on trellises and as a 'mailbox vine.' Despite the safety concerns, it has also been used medicinally to treat a variety of medical conditions which include headaches, asthma, rheumatism, and measles!

Yellow jessamine is probably best left safely in the wild, where it is a beautiful, fragrant member of our native communities in Alabama. Not surprisingly, it is admired in other southern states, such as South Carolina where it is their state flower. ☘