

The Joy of Weeds

Florida's Wildflowers

by David Hall

COMMON SPIDERWORT

The attractive flowers, ease of propagation, and freedom from care makes Common Spiderwort a superior wildflower for landscaping.

Common Spiderwort, *Tradescantia ohiensis* Raf., is in the Spiderwort Family (Commelinaceae). *Tradescantia* was named for John Tradescant who was a gardener to Charles the First of England. *Ohiensis* simply means "of Ohio." This species is commonly found from Massachusetts south into Florida and west to Manitoba in Canada, southwards through Minnesota and Nebraska into Texas. Within Florida, it is found as far south as Sarasota. This wildflower is most frequently found in disturbed areas such as roadsides, old fields, cut over woods, tree plantations, or weedy, moist turf. Often it is seen along the edges of woods or in openings. The moisture requirement for this plant is quite variable, ranging from very moist near lakes and ponds to fairly dry in pine woods.

Common Spiderwort is a perennial, herbaceous plant usually growing from 50-80 cm (about 32") tall, rarely reaching 1 m (3 ft.) in height. Unlike many other species in the Spiderwort Family, this plant does not creep or run along the ground. It grows erect from fleshy roots. The stems and leaves are smooth and covered with a thin gray, waxy coating. The plant is somewhat fleshy. The leaves are up to 40 cm (about 16") long and usually not more



Drawing by Anne Vogt

Spiderwort, *Tradescantia ohiensis*

than 2 cm (3/4") wide. The base of the leaf is closed around the stem forming a sheath. The flowers are borne in clusters with 1-3 leaf-like bracts below them. Each of the few to many flowers in the clusters has a thin stalk to about 2 cm (3/4") long. The outside of the flower is composed of three separate, green sepals with a tiny tuft of hairs at the tip. The three separate petals are up to 2 cm long and are blue, rose, rose-purple, or rarely white. The thin filaments (stalks) of the six anthers (the pollen container) are covered with hairs. The fruit is a dry, three-lobed capsule to 6 mm (just over 1/4") long containing three seeds. The seeds are 3-4 mm (less than 1/8") long and

extremely roughened with a line down one side and a circular pit on the opposite side.

Flowering is usually during the spring from March through May and again in the fall from October through November. Some flowering occurs during the hot months of summer, but is reduced. Flowering can occur during the winter if the plants are not frozen back.

Common Spiderwort can be propagated by seeds. It does best with broken shade in moist soil containing some organic matter. However, fairly dry, open, sandy sites can be used. During times of drought, watering will improve growth and flowering.

The flowers cannot be cut and used as the petals will autodeliquesce, or self digest. Enzymes within the cells of the petals are released upon cutting the stem or flower and instantly start to dissolve the petals. To make a collection of these flowers one must immediately place the specimen between sheets of wax paper before placing it between sheets of cardboard or paper, and then apply firm, gentle pressure in a dry environment. This procedure will remove the moisture rapidly causing the deterioration to stop. To be used indoors the plants must be kept in containers.

Another unusual feature of this plant is that the cells of the hairs on the anther filaments are quite large. The cells are large enough so that with at least a ten power lens one can see the streaming protoplasm. Because of this unusual feature, Spiderworts are often used to demonstrate this biological process in beginning botany classes.