

The Joy of Weeds

Florida's Wildflowers

by David Hall

ERECT DAY-FLOWER

The attractive flowers, interesting plant form, bright green foliage, ease of propagation, and freedom from care makes this Day-flower a useful wildflower in the home landscape.

Erect Day-flower, *Commelina erecta* L., is in the Spiderwort Family (Commelinaceae). *Commelina* was named for three Dutch botanists called Commelin. Some species in this genus, including this one, have two showy, large blue petals and one less showy, smaller white petal. Two of the Dutch botanists named Commelin were prominent, but the third died before he accomplished much in botany, and the analogy was too great to resist: the Dutchmen are immortalized in the two large petals and the one small white one.

The species name *erecta* refers to the upright habit of growth. This plant is commonly found from New York and Wisconsin south to Texas and Florida. Within Florida, it is found throughout the state in dry to slightly moist areas, occurring in sandhills, dry oak woods, sandy croplands, dry to moist pinelands, rocklands, and dry, disturbed areas.

Erect Day-flower foliage is bright green and slightly fleshy in appearance. It is a perennial, herbaceous plant from one to three feet (usually ten to eighteen inches) tall or long. The growth is erect or ascending at first, but the plant often leans, or even falls to the ground, for the stem is not strong. Branching is irregular and forked. The long, narrow leaves are up to six inches long and a little over one inch wide,



but in Florida are usually no more than five inches long and half an inch wide. The base of the leaf is closed around the stem forming a cylinder. The plant dies back to a cluster of fleshy, hairy roots each year. New shoots arise from buds on the roots.

The flowers, with their two blue petals and one small white one, are quite showy, sometimes reaching one and a half inches across, but usually they're about an inch in

diameter. Each flower is contained in a leaf modified in the shape of a boat. The flower is pushed above the boat-shaped leaf and opens early in the morning. In the early afternoon, the flower becomes a sticky mass and recedes back into the boat-shaped leaf. Even if cut fresh, the flowers will not last, as they quickly become a sticky mass, caused by a process called autodeliquescence. This long word means self-digestion. Enzymes within the cells of the petals are released when they start to die in the early afternoon, or when the flowers are cut, instantly starting to dissolve the petals. This same thing happens to Spiderwort, the similar flower written about in the last issue of **Palmetto**.

To make a collection of these flowers, one must immediately place the cut specimen between sheets of wax paper and between sheets of cardboard or heavy paper, and then apply firm, gentle pressure in a dry environment. This procedure will remove the moisture rapidly, stopping the deterioration. To be displayed indoors, the plants must be grown in containers.

Flowering occurs all summer. One to three smooth seeds about one-fourth inch long are contained within the boat-shaped leaves. Propagation is by seed. Transplanting the perennial roots can be accomplished if a goodly portion of soil is also taken. The Day-flower can be planted in open sun to broken shade. It does best in dry, sandy soil. And it's a beauty in your wildflower garden.