

The Joy of Weeds

Common Beggar's-tick

by David W. Hall



Helen Huseman

In 1622—369 years ago—the treasure ship Nuestra Señora de Atocha sank in the Gulf of Mexico. In 1987, an archeologist working for treasure hunter Mel Fisher discovered seeds in the sand and gravel of the sunken ship's ballast. These seeds were recovered and placed in cups of fresh water to keep them from decaying. To the surprise of everyone, four of the seeds germinated. Two of the seedlings were identified as common beggar's-tick. One of these two seedlings was grown out. It flowered and appeared to be quite normal.

It is a mystery how these seeds survived. The seeds had to have been protected from both salt and oxygen, for the seeds of common beggar's-tick cannot survive in salt water, and oxygen would have enabled them to germinate. The only explanation that seems to make sense is that the soil in the bottom of the ship must have been tightly packed, effectively sealing the seeds. The seeds probably came aboard when the ship docked at ports in the Caribbean.

This story shows how we sometimes move plants in the most unlikely ways imaginable. It emphasizes how plants can attain a worldwide distribution.

Common beggar's-tick (*Bidens alba* (L.) DC., synonym *B. pilosa* (L.)), sometimes known as hairy beggar's-tick or, incorrectly, as Spanish needle, is found throughout Florida and virtually everywhere in the subtropics and tropics of both hemispheres. It is a coarse dicotyledonous annual or a short-lived perennial in the Sunflower (Asteraceae or Compositae) Family. It is an annual in the parts of its range where temperatures reach freezing. In warmer areas it frequently persists for more than a year. In a situation where the plant gets reduced light and competition, it can reach nine feet in height. Usually this taprooted species is erect, but infrequently it will bend at the base. If this weedy native is mowed frequently, it can bloom when less than two inches tall. Occasionally in mowed areas it will stretch laterally along the ground and sometimes root at some joints.

The opposite leaves are composed of three to seven leaflets (compound) and the leaflets are two to ten centimeters long and one to three and a half centimeters wide. Leaflet edges are toothed and the underside of the blade is hairy.

Flowers are daisy-like, with white, ray-petal-like flowers on the outside of the head, and a disc of small yellow flowers in the center. The seeds are four-angled

and spindle-shaped with two to six sharp-pointed projections at the top.

Seedlings have linear seed leaves (cotyledons) with a mid-vein evident as a depression on the upper surface. The first true leaves are opposite and deeply cut into segments. Each segment is elliptic. The leaves above the first true leaves are opposite and simple (only a single blade). These simple leaves resemble the leaflets of mature leaves. Since the leaves are simple, seedlings are frequently misidentified.

The genus name, *Bidens*, means two-toothed, and refers to the two projections usually found at the top of the seed. The species name, *alba*, meaning white, alludes to the white flowers.

Common beggar's-tick grows best in disturbed areas with sandy soil. The seeds are easily detached and cling to passing animals by the projections at the top. Seeds germinate easily, but the germination can be enhanced by slitting the end. Each plant produces an average of 1,205 seeds. The spread of the plants can be controlled by eliminating some of the plants prior to flowering, reducing the number of seeds available to germinate.

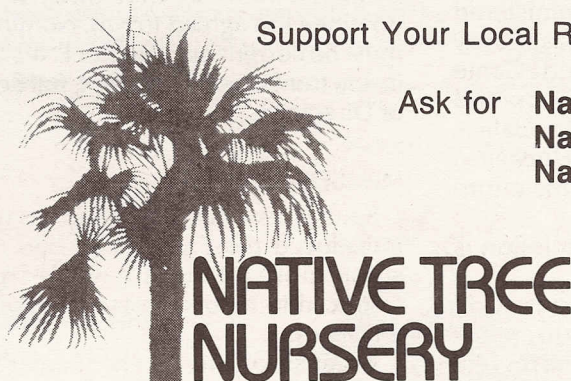
Beggar's-tick is a favorite nectaring flower of many species of butterflies. Its fresh new leaves can be cooked as a vegetable, and its white petals can be added to the salad for a tasty garnish. Don't condemn it as a noxious weed!

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