

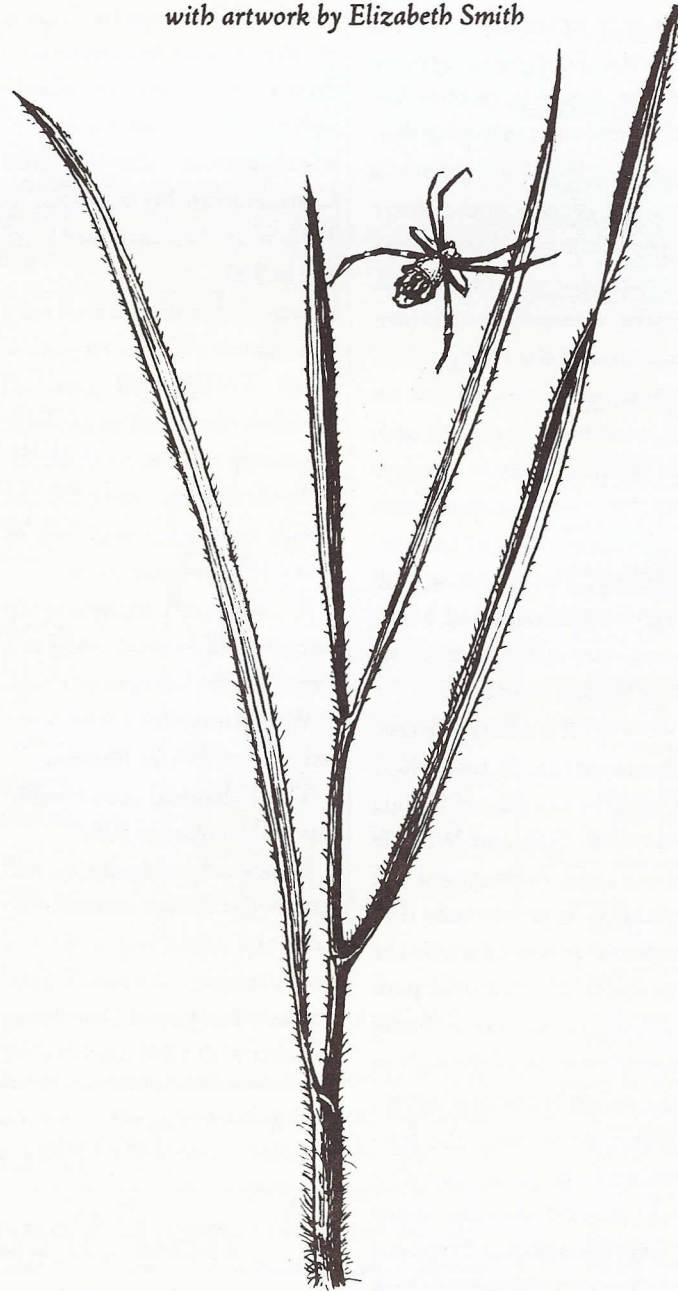
Few-Flowered Fingergrass

by Roger Hammer

with artwork by Elizabeth Smith

Most people would likely not recognize the genus *Digitaria*, unless, of course, one mentioned the familiar name *crabgrass*. About 380 species of *Digitaria* occur in tropical and temperate regions of the world and some species are important forage grasses for livestock. Although some authors list anywhere from nine to fourteen species of *Digitaria* as occurring in Florida, the upcoming *Flora of Florida*, a collaborative project of the University of South Florida in Tampa and Fairchild Tropical Garden in Miami, will report twenty-one native and naturalized species found within the boundaries of the state.

The genus *Digitaria* was named from the latin *digitus*, meaning "finger," in allusion to the digitate inflorescence. Crabgrass, *Digitaria sanguinalis*, native to Europe and a troublesome lawn weed throughout the United States, is the type species of the genus. While a number of endemic species of *Digitaria* in Florida have very limited natural ranges, there is one particular species that is restricted to a thirty-one square



Few-flowered fingergrass, *Digitaria pauciflora*, with silver argiope spider, *Argiope argentata*.

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mile portion of Everglades National Park — the few-flowered fingergrass, *Digitaria pauciflora*.

Just after the turn of the present century, the Harvard botanist Oakes Ames (1874-1950), who was working on the first fascicle of his extensive treatment of the Orchidaceae, made a decision that would join together an impressive trio of field botanists. Ames' assistant, Alvah Augustus Eaton, a fern enthusiast, was sent on a three-year botanical excursion to southern Florida. His purpose was to search for orchids. During a portion of the first year of the expedition, Eaton was accompanied by two other indefatigable botanists, John Kunkel Small and Joel Jackson Carter. Small is perhaps best known as the author of *Manual of Southeastern Flora*, a classic on the flora of the southeastern United States. Carter was a less well-known botanist from Pleasant Grove, Pennsylvania.

Traveling around in southern Florida in a horse-drawn wagon on few trails was their only mode of travel, but they overcame this hardship and managed to make

some remarkable botanical discoveries. In addition to discovering an impressive array of previously unknown Florida native orchids, in the fall of 1903 they collected an insignificant grass in the Redland area of southern Dade County. This specimen would remain undescribed for many years.

In May 1935, A.S. Hitchcock, a botanist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Division of Plant Exploration and Introduction, published the name *Digitaria pauciflora* in his *Manual of the Grasses of the United States*. This species has not been collected in southern Florida outside of Everglades National Park since those early years. The Redland, where Eaton, Small, and Carter collected their specimen, is a portion of unincorporated Dade County that lies east of Everglades National Park near Homestead. The Redland is now mostly agriculture and rural development. The open prairies and piney woods that once harbored *Digitaria pauciflora* have long ago disappeared.

Digitaria pauciflora, meaning "few-flowered fingergrass," is now known only from Long Pine Key, the principal upland habitat in Everglades National Park. Long Pine Key is a twenty-thousand acre portion of the 1.4 million acre park and consists mainly of pine rockland that is periodically interrupted by grassy prairies and tropical hardwood hammocks. On Long Pine Key, the few-flowered fingergrass prefers the open, sunny prairies, especially the narrow ecotone where prairie borders pine rockland. These

everglades prairies are often referred to as *transverse glades*, or *finger glades*, and have an alkaline marl substrate with numerous jagged, oolitic limestone outcroppings.

Although an attractive species, *D. pauciflora*, like many grasses, is often overlooked. The leaves are distinctly blue-green in color and the stems and leaves are covered with soft white hairs. It is a perennial, fire-tolerant species, forming clumps up to three feet in diameter and rarely taller than about two feet. New growth is erect and appears in the center of the clump. Older stems eventually droop to the ground, forming a perimeter of brown leaves around the young stems. Flowers appear in late fall on both new and old growth and, remembering the name *pauciflora* (few flowers), you must look closely to appreciate, or even see, the flowers. The flowers are dull green, insignificant, and borne on wiry two-inch spikes on the tips of the leaf stems.

Although it is a distinctly rare, endemic species, *D. pauciflora* is not listed by the state of Florida or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as endangered or threatened. It is fortunate that this grass is protected within the boundaries of a national park and that its habitat is being properly maintained through an active prescribed burn program. If you've never seen the few-flowered fingergrass, then that will be as good an excuse as any to visit Everglades National Park. You may also want to look at the alligators, wading birds, and bald eagles. ☀

[Let's hope that Roger continues to provide us with these little gems for The Palmetto -Editor.]