Florida’s Wildflowers

common name for the plant is due to the look of these flower heads on long stalks—baby’s bath-brush.

This perennial vine creeps on the ground, rooting at the joints. The branched stems can be up to six feet long, but are usually no more than two to three feet in length. Leaves are two times compound having two to five branches (pinnae) with six to fifteen pairs of leaflets each. The individual leaflets are very small and usually are not more than 4mm long (1/16”). The leaves lean up and out. The entire plant is covered with short, stiff hairs but they are not very prickly.

The pinkish to lavender flowers occur in globose to cylindric heads that can be up to 2cm (3/4”) wide. The heads are held above the plant on stalks that are 4 to 10cm (1 1/2” to 4”) long. The flowers are quite small, about 2mm (1/16”) long, with many pinkish stamens sticking out giving the head a fuzzy look. The fruits are small bean pods covered with stiff hairs. The pods appear to be divided into three joints when they ripen. Flowering is from April to July and occasionally again from October into December or until the first frost. Fruiting follows flowering with mature fruits found as early as May and as late as December. The fruits are considered poisonous to humans.

Propagation can be by seeds or cuttings. When obtaining cuttings a portion of the stem containing a few rooted joints should be taken. This can be done at any time of year but yields best results in cold weather. When planting, make sure soil is placed over a portion of the joints. The seeds usually need to have the outside layer (seed coat) broken or cracked before they will germinate. The most reliable method is to transplant. Almost any soil except the very wet or the very dry can be used.

Mimosa vine can be a valuable ornamental in an area where no maintenance is desired. It will withstand traffic well and acts as a soil binder. The delightful “baby’s bath-brush” flower heads are a visual treat in the spring and fall. The large balls of pink to lavender flowers appear to come out of the ground when viewed from a distance.

If your landscape can use a low, inconspicuous vine which will provide a surprise for you in the spring and fall, plant this native.

Butterflies and Native Plants

Malachite, Atala, White Peacock

by Eve Ilnannahs

Because of geographic location and proximity to the Atlantic Ocean and especially the warm Gulf of Mexico, Florida has unique plant communities and insect populations. Some lepidoptera of Florida are found rarely or never in other states of the continental United States, with the exception of southernmost Texas.

The tropical butterfly, Malachite, Siproeta stelens, is one of these—a large, 2 1/2 to 3 inch tailed butterfly of unusual beauty. Above, it is black with marbled green; underneath the marbled green it is marked with white and light brown. As the insect ages, the green soon fades to almost white.

It has been suggested that these butterflies are strays, but there is evidence that they breed in Hidden Woods Park, in the Ft. Lauderdale area. The distinct caterpillar, to 2” in length; is velvety black with red bristles and recurved horns. It feeds on Blechum brownei and other related species. Blechum is common to most of Florida.

The once common Atala, Eumaeus atala, of southernmost Florida was thought at one time to be extinct in the U.S. because of destruction or alteration of habitat. The small, 1 1/2” butterfly is velvety black above with a blue iridescent sheen. Below, it is black with three rows of metallic blue dots on the hind wing. The coral-red abdomen has a matching spot on the hind wing.

The showy dark red caterpillars have two rows of yellow spots. Their host plants are members of the Cycadaceae. They are reported to be partial to zamias, especially Z. integrifolia, but are also reported to be found on rare cycads in Fairchild Gardens! Their range is extreme south Florida and the Bahamas.

The white peacock, Anartia jatrophae, one of the brush footed butterflies, is related to the Buckeye. Klots states that in the tropics it forms many sub-species and local forms. The handsome 2 to 2 1/2” butterfly has rounded wing tips and a stubby tail. Above coloring has silver-white ground with white outlines on both sets of wings; bordering colors are orange and brown. Above and underneath surfaces have intricate patterns of orange and brown. The hind wing has two eye spots underneath.

This butterfly is reported to be widespread in the tropics, and can be found in Florida and the southern regions of Texas. They have been sighted as far north as Kansas and Massachusetts, but the sighting is a rarity. Although white peacocks are considered common in Florida, they seem to be restricted to disturbed fresh water shorelines. During early November of 1985, large colonies were observed on the shores of a pond in Lake Woodruff Wildlife Preserve west of Deland. They were feeding on water hyssop, Bacopa, and creeping charlie or capeweed, Lippia nodiflora. No caterpillars were observed.