

Lowly Bidens Alba Serves People as Well as Butterflies

by Penelope N. Honychurch

Human uses of *Bidens alba*

As an antiseptic bath

A bath made with the plant effectively removes particles of fiberglass from the skin. Submersion and soaking in the bath along with the plants will achieve the best results. These plants are useful to alleviate rashes, itching, and other skin problems by bathing the skin with a brew made from the plant.

As an anti-inflammatory for the eyes

In the past, Caribs in the Antilles used the juice from the leaves for irritated eyes.

For boat builders in the Bahamas, particularly those working with fiberglass, the primary use has been as a bath, and for others in other islands that of an anti-inflammatory wash.

The recording of these uses in no way endorses their efficacy, but rather points out that even the most unlikely of plants may have useful properties. ✨

Those of us with wild gardens often bemoan *Bidens alba*, a quickly spreading wildflower whose needle-like seeds cover everything - gardeners, dogs, visiting friends. FNPS members learn to live with *Bidens*, as it is perhaps the favored nectar plant for most of our butterflies. Thanks to Penelope Honychurch, we now have another reason to look with a kind eye toward this much maligned weed. -Editor

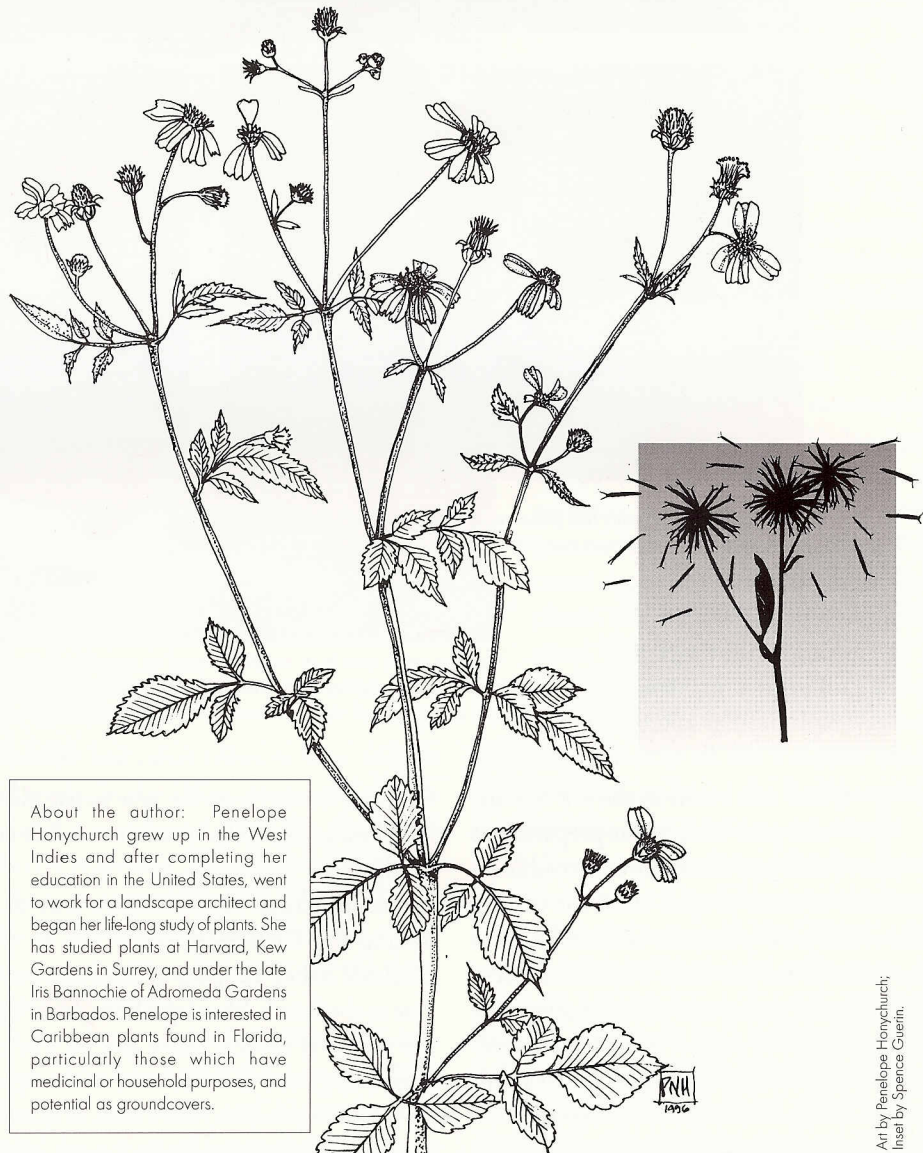
Bidens alba Asteraceae Synonym: *Bidens pilosa*

COMMON ENGLISH NAMES: shepherd's needles, shepherd's ticks, Spanish needles, needle grass. Common Creole/patois names: zeb zeduit, zeb herbe, zeb aiguille.

Long and Lakela state that there exist about 240 species of *Bidens*, cosmopolitan, but chiefly found in America, in the tropics and subtropics of both hemispheres.

DESCRIPTION: An herbaceous plant with a stem that may have ridges and sometimes may be colored purple at the nodes. The plant can grow to 1 meter tall, branching out as it ascends. The opposite leaves are pinnately divided or undivided. The leaflets are lanceolate to ovate in shape. The leaflets may grow up to 30 cm in shady places. The disc flowers are yellow and 4-7 ray flowers are white and sometimes reduced.

HABITAT: Found in disturbed sites, in hedges, along edges of habitats, canals, and noticeably in median strips or swales along South Florida highways and roadways where they bloom only several inches from the soil, perhaps because of their adaptation to highway mowing practices. The plants appear as a swathe of white flowers, particularly along medians on the Florida turnpike in South Broward and North Dade counties. They accompany another species, *Richardia grandifolia*, in this regard.



About the author: Penelope Honychurch grew up in the West Indies and after completing her education in the United States, went to work for a landscape architect and began her life-long study of plants. She has studied plants at Harvard, Kew Gardens in Surrey, and under the late Iris Bannoche of Adromeda Gardens in Barbados. Penelope is interested in Caribbean plants found in Florida, particularly those which have medicinal or household purposes, and potential as groundcovers.