

## Miniature Native Plants

# *Stenandrium dulce* var. *floridanum*

by Rufino Osorio

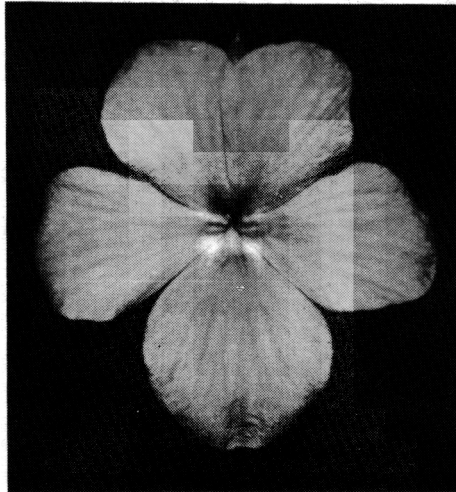
The Acanthus Family (Acanthaceae) encompasses a large assemblage of approximately 2,500 species found throughout the tropics, with a few species extending into temperate areas. The tropical nature of this family is easily confirmed by a few statistics: The whole of the northeastern United States, with a land area much exceeding that of the state of Florida, contains only about ten species of Acanthaceae. About twice that many species, however, are native to Florida.

Although of little practical utility, the family is especially rich in horticulturally attractive species, with many possessing variegated foliage and/or colorful bracts that contrast beautifully with the attractive flowers.

None of the most dramatically beautiful species in this family are native to Florida, for all are truly tropical. In south-central and southern Florida, however, a diminutive member of this family is found that combines great charm with colorful flowers. This is *Stenandrium dulce* var. *floridanum*, a member of a genus of about 30 species confined to the subtropics and tropics of the New World.

In the wild, these plants form 5cm (2") wide rosettes of attractive dark green leaves at ground level. The flowers are borne in spikes carried at the top of leafless stems (technically referred to as scapes). The flowering spikes are rigidly erect when young, but they often become elongated and rest on the ground with age. The beautiful clear pink to dark rose flowers are about 2.5 cm (1") in diameter and they are borne one or two at a time at the tip of the spike over a long period.

This species takes well to cultivation and should be grown in rather large containers in order to accommodate its robust root system. For maximum development, plants need to be grown in full sun in a rich but well-drained soil mix, watered regularly, and fertilized every few months. Under such conditions, the plants luxuriate and form multiple rosettes which can bear as many as four flowering scapes simultaneously. Unfortunately, the flowers open in the morning and last just a few hours, although they may linger until late afternoon on overcast days or in cool weather. How-



© 1989, Rufino Osorio

ever, they produce freely, and well-tended plants open a few flowers nearly every week of the year except in the very coldest months.

Even isolated plants will set seed capsules. Thus, they are self-fertile. Whether or not they are self-pollinating is not clear. The capsules open explosively and hurl the seeds for some distance, making the collection of seeds quite difficult. Such self-sown seeds serve to spread this little plant throughout the garden, but the plants are not at all weedy. Indeed, they seem to establish themselves only in open ground where competition from other plants is at a minimum. Left to their own devices, these self-sown seedlings have been very slow growing, the little plants seemingly dedicating themselves to the establishment of a strong root system during their first year or two. They are not fools and they seem to know that Florida's fickle weather may bring a drought at any time!

Since this little plant is unfamiliar to many Floridians, a few words regarding its natural habitat might be appropriate. Plants were found growing in clearings in sandy pinelands in a county park in Palm Beach County. The soil was very poor and no large plants were growing near the *Stenandrium*. Associates consisted of equally tiny plants including *Dyschoriste angusta* and *Evolvulus sericeus*. The site evidently was maintained in an open state through periodic fires since there were numerous signs of a recent fire including much charred plant debris. Thus it appears that this species can survive fires. These comments are based solely

on the observation of two populations at one site and may not be applicable to populations of this species elsewhere in Florida.

*Rufino Osorio, awards registrar for the American Orchid Society, is a devotee of miniature plants. With his past articles, he has been able to offer seeds from the plants he has written about, but he says it is not possible in this case. Stenandrium dulce forms only a few capsules per plant and each capsule contains only four seeds. In addition, the capsules dehisce explosively, scattering the seeds before they can be collected. Mr. Osorio will have another article in the next issue of The Palmetto.*

Many small herbaceous plants are of great interest botanically. Many will grow to perfection in pots. Some are extremely decorative and worthy of greater promulgation among both hobbyist growers and the wildflower horticultural trade. I have offered small native wildflowers as potted plants in several fund raisers and have always gone home empty-handed. I believe this indicates real horticultural and commercial possibilities for such plants—possibilities that wildflower nurseries have scarcely considered.

Rufino Osorio

Because of a lack of suitable gardening space, Rufino Osorio has specialized in the horticulture of small native plants in containers, both as patio plants and as house plants. He is currently developing simplified and inexpensive methods to raise orchids from seed using aseptic culture.

Though seeds for *Stenandrium dulce* are not available, Mr. Osorio has offered seeds from the plants discussed in his previous articles: miniature pipevine (*Aristolochia serpentaria*) and *Pectis linearifolia*. Send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the author, 2184 Ambergate Lane E., West Palm Beach, FL 33415-7269, indicating which seeds you want.