
The Palmetto

Quarterly Magazine of the Florida Native Plant Society • Vol. 13, No. 3 • Fall 1993

Stinking Passion-Flower *Hero or Villain?*

by Daniel F. Austin

In the middle 1970s I reported the stinking passion-flower (*Passiflora foetida*) as having escaped from cultivation in Palm Beach County (*Florida Scientist* 39:230-235. 1977). By the 1980s the species was considered "rare" in the county by Wunderlin (1982. *Guide to the Vascular Plants of Central Florida*. Univ. Presses of Florida / Univ. South Florida Press, Tampa), although it had spread dozens of miles in all directions from its original source in West Palm Beach. Since that time the plant has been spreading continuously. The vine has been spread not only by animals such as birds, which eat the red fruits and seeds, but also by the vectors that introduced this tropical American plant into the state humans.

This recent spread by humans has been going on during perhaps only the 1990s. The addition of the human vector is tied to a newly popular hobby involving the growing and encouraging of butterflies by providing food plants for these winged marvels. Among the most popular and well-known butterflies in southern Florida are the tropical heliconiids: Nymphalidae subfamily Heliconiinae or family Heliconiidae, depending on the authority. Southern Florida has three of these, the zebra (*Heliconius charitonius*), the Gulf fritillary (*Dione vanillae* formerly *Ag-raulis vanillae*), and the julia (*Dryas julia*). The popularity of these butterflies rests not only with their colorful nature, but also



Passiflora foetida

their association with the plants in the passion-flower family, Passifloraceae. Butterfly larvae in this insect group are so highly specialized that they feed only on members of the passion-flower family. Deprived of a passion-flower food source, heliconiid larvae will die. Cultivation of any member of the passion-flower family will nearly guarantee the appearance of these butterflies.

Although southern Florida has more members in the Passifloraceae than any other place in the southern United States east of Texas - we have six species while Texas has eight - most of south Florida's species are not very showy. Moreover, our

most widely distributed native species, the corky-stemmed passionflower, *Passiflora suberosa*, is never abundant. Since the showy and common species in the northern parts of the state, the maypops (*Passiflora incarnata*), barely reaches the southern region, our butterfly enthusiasts have begun feeling neglected. Instead of extending the range slightly south of the wonderful native maypops, many of these people have elected to grow and spread the new addition to our Florida flora, the stinking passionflower, *Passiflora foetida*.

Those of us who have watched the spread and invasion of exotic plants into native habitats and the exotic competition with native species view this action as ill-advised. Remember those who touted the melaleuca, casuarina, pepper tree, Bermuda grass, carrotwood, and all the other pest plants we now have in Florida? Do you wish to join their ranks by adding to the spread of pests running wild in Florida?

Right now the stinking passionflower is just a Palm Beach County disturbed-site pest. Those who know it only as food for butterflies see it as a hero. Others of us see it as a villain waiting in the wings to join forces with all the other introduced pest plants we have spread without thinking of the consequences of our actions.

If you want to help butterflies, grow any of the *native* species of *Passiflora*. There are several from which to choose, ranging from the rare and inconspicuous to the

common and showy. Native plants are better for Florida ecosystems than exotics.

Exotic Florida Passifloras

Passiflora edulis (passion fruit) -southeastern Peninsular counties.

Passiflora foetida (stinking passion-flower) - Palm Beach County.

Native Florida Passifloras

Passiflora incarnata (maypop; apricot vine) – mostly north of Lake Okeechobee, but occasionally found to Broward County on the east coast and Collier County on the west coast. Our most showy member of the genus.

Passiflora lutea (yellow passion-flower) – reported from Dade; mostly northern part of the Peninsula near Gainesville and extending into the Panhandle in Jackson, Liberty, and Leon counties.

Passiflora multiflora (passion-flower) – Dade and Monroe counties.

Passiflora pallens (pale passion-flower) – Collier, Dade and Monroe counties.

Passiflora sexflora (passion-flower) – Dade County.

Passiflora suberos (corcky-stemmed passion-flower) – nearly throughout the Peninsula from about Gainesville south.



Suggested citation for this article

Austin, D. 1993. Stinking Passion-flower: Hero or villain?. *The Palmetto*, 13(3):5.
<http://www.fnps.org/palmetto/v13i3p5austin.pdf> (6 July, 2002).

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