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Palmetto



Stickywilly, North Florida's Winter Hobo

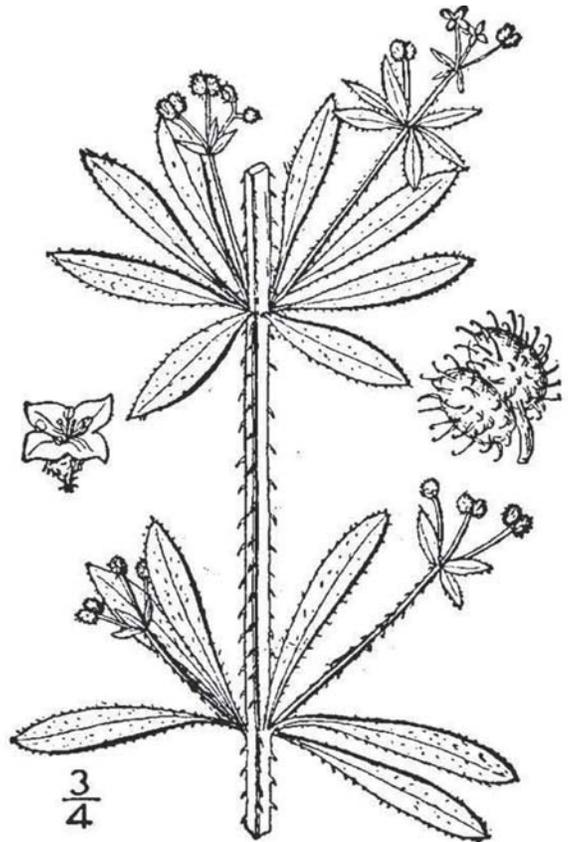
Fritz Wettstein

Stickywilly lounges in an area of my backyard which deserves the sign "Under Construction". He camps there with his green companions, Crane's Bill, Wood Sorrel, Violet, Poke and Rattlesnake Weed in the dappled late winter shade of a declining water oak. Stickywilly is an annual winter weed that grows as low mats of sprawling green stems and whorled leaves out by the back fence in rich soils, not too wet and not too dry, and fertilized by our dogs, Hannah and Marybelle. Stickywilly is the winter hobo of my unkempt North Florida backyard. He shows up when the other migrants have left with the frost. He spreads a mass of tangled stems, puts out tiny white flowers, goes to seed and disappears for the long hot humid summer. If you live in the humid temperate climates of North America or Europe, and have a fallow garden patch or plant bed under construction, stickywilly probably stops by your yard too.

Stickywilly is an annual herb found across the temperate zones of North America and Eurasia. It has been named goosegrass, cleavers, catchweed and numerous other common names. Carolus Linnaeus, the great Swedish taxonomist, named it *Galium aparine* in 1753. *Galium* is the genus name for a group of closely related herbaceous plants that are members of the madder plant family, known as the Rubiaceae. The madder family includes several showy small American trees such as the pink flowered *Pinckneya bracteata*, or fever tree, and *Cephalanthus occidentalis*, the swallowtail attracting buttonbush of Florida swamps. The madder family also includes the coffee plant, *Coffea arabica*, whose beans share coffee's aromatic flavor with the small seeds of *Galium*. Many more madders are inconspicuous herbaceous groundcovers. Two found in North American woodlands are *Hedyotis procumbens*, a diminutive plant called innocence, and *Mitchella repens*, called partridge berry or twinberry for its unique Siamese twin-like fruit. Most members of the madder plant family, including stickywilly, innocence and partridge berry have small, white star shaped flowers.

Members of the *Galium* genus that are native to Florida are easily identified by the distinctive sets of whorled leaves on the low clambering herbs. Four to eight strap shaped leaves radiate from growing points or nodes spaced fairly equidistant along lax, bright green square stems, giving the plant the look of having sprung from the pages of a Dr. Seuss book. Eight species of bedstraw occur in Florida, ranging from North Florida bluffs to peninsular Florida coastal hammocks and marshes.

As reflected in their names, *Galium* species have had a long, curious association with people. Collectively referred to as



Source: USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database / Britton, N.L., and A. Brown. 1913. An illustrated flora of the northern United States, Canada and the British Possessions. 3 vols. Charles Scribner's Sons, New York. Vol. 3: 259.

bedstraws, their natural history includes Stone Age European farmers, early Spanish missions in North Florida, Edwardian herbalists, American settlers and modern gardeners. The *Galium* genus is named after "gala," the Greek word for milk. To make cheese, herders strained goat or camel milk through baskets fashioned from *Galium* stems, which was believed to help curdle the milk. "Gala," as in the Milky Way Galaxy, is also used in the name of the milkwort genus of *Polygala*. Whether bedstraw curdles milk, or milkwort sweetens milk may be merely plant lore. Still, since an Internet search of *Galium* reveals a host of sites attributing medicinal attributes to the herb, there is probably something to it. These experiments are best left to the herbalists.

Stickywilly, with the scientific name of *Galium aparine*, is distinguished from other *Galium* species by its stickiness. Common names "stickywilly," "catchweed," and "cleavers" as well as the specific epithet *aparine*, refer to the plant's ability to latch onto to a passing trouser leg or shoe. Cleavers, in the sense of cleave as "to adhere to," and *aparine*, a Greek term for "to seize," both reflect the effect of the numerous curved stiff hairs on the leaves and stems and bristles on the leaves. The fruits especially bear these prickles, perhaps passing on the hitchhiking trait to the leaves and stems. Botanists refer to this trait as "retroscaly scabrous." Maybe not as aggressively as the

yellow flowered herb of south Florida called beggar's patch, *Mentzelia floridana*, once stickywilly gets a handle, it keeps a retrorsely scabrous hold, sticking to skin, clothes or hair.

My first encounter with bedstraw was in graduate studies of the North Carolina Outer Banks maritime hammocks. In field botany, students learn the scientific names of plants along with identifying characteristics and anecdotes that create memorable impressions. Botanists, probably much as the herders, witch doctors, shamans or village elders before them, develop stories to make the subject more relevant, telling of a medicinal or other utility of the plant, or including in a plant's name a description of its unique features or growing conditions. Nobody forgets *Ilex vomitoria*, the scientific name for yaupon holly named for the effect of the "black drink" brewed from it. It was easy for me to consider the term "bedstraw" and imagine the industriousness of early settlers gathering up enough of the sprawling stems to stuff a mattress, but the plant hardly appears robust or dominant enough to be a harvestable resource. Its occurrence in scattered low patches made it difficult to conceive – "gee, I can gather up a bunch of these plants, dry them, and stuff mattresses," – unlike the Spanish moss that blankets maritime hammock branches. Yes, one could envision folks raking Spanish moss from low overhanging branches and piling it up for processing, but bedstraw? Not so easy.

Compounding my skepticism for bedstraw actually being used as bedding are the traits of stickywilly, the most common *Galium* species encountered. It is hard to imagine it as the right stuff for bedding, unless, somehow, the cleaving of the material reduces mattress memory.

The Internet search referenced earlier gave additional pause regarding bedstraw's utility as bedding material. In addition to the sites extolling bedstraw's medicinal virtues, numerous sites, including Dave's Garden, offered testimony to negative weedy characteristics. Methods of weed control ranged from mowing it down to eating it. Unfortunately for most, the best control methods probably do not involve not touching the plant. Some gardeners reported suffering rashes and small boils when pulling it from their parts of the garden under construction. Although the Internet search was enough to deter thoughts of an experimental bedstraw mattress, it did encourage further research into bedstraw's natural history.

As it turns out, bedstraw refers to the more polite members of the *Galium* genus, as opposed to the disreputable stickywilly. Unlike the native bedstraws of Florida and the Southeastern United States, like the shy *G. uniflorum* which hides in the leaf litter of our forests, many of the genus have showy flowers or glamorous traits that would earn a page, photograph or drawing in a roadside wildflower or native garden book. Several species seem useful as ornamental bedding plants in dryer, poor soils out West. Many in the blogosphere tout the benefits of creating herbal medicines from marsh bedstraw, *G. tinctorium*, as remedies for various maladies. With a little reading it also becomes much easier to envision stuffing beds

with lady's bedstraw, *G. triflorum*, which dried has the sweetly scented grassy smell of dried hay. Legend has it that the Virgin Mary lay the Christ Child on bedstraw in the manger, "and it is told, 'Our Lady's Bedstraw has bloomed gold e're since.'"¹ The trouble is that these nice plants have not made it to my backyard. Good members of their native plant communities, they either have to be sought out in natural areas beyond the fenceline, or in the memories of folklorists.

No, stickywilly probably wandered from afar to my backyard on a path similar to many Eurasian plant and animal species. A capable hitchhiker very well adapted to new ground disturbed by the plow or herd, he had crossed Russia, taken the British Isles and left his footprint all over the Northern Hemisphere. His seeds, sifted from the long cold fires of north Florida Spanish missions, and distinctive with their hooked bristles, have given evidence that his roots in the New World may trace back to a Spanish conquistador's pants legs or baskets of winter wheat. For all his travels and conquests, his variable, cosmopolitan tastes earned stickywilly the title "Major Arable Weed (Especially of Cereal Crops)."² Fame or infamy found the black sheep wanderer of the bedstraw family.

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(<http://www.essortment.com/ladys-bedstraw-myth-behind-it-64791.html>)

² "Biological Flora of the British Isles No. 207: *Galium aparine* L." K. Taylor. *Journal of Ecology*. 1999. 87. 713-730.

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The Palmetto

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Official definition of native plant:

For most purposes, the phrase Florida native plant refers to those species occurring within the state boundaries prior to European contact, according to the best available scientific and historical documentation. More specifically, it includes those species understood as indigenous, occurring in natural associations in habitats that existed prior to significant human impacts and alterations of the landscape.

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