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Palmetto



Notes on *Harrisia fragrans* • Native Container Gardening • *Helenium amarum*



Spanish Daisy

Helenium amarum

by Rufino Osorio

Long gone are the days when a Florida native garden was an arboretum of trees and shrubs with an occasional vine or two. The native garden palette has expanded considerably in the last twenty years and wildflowers and grasses are now commonplace. However, there are still colorful, floriferous, common, and easy-to-grow native wildflowers that continue to be overlooked by gardeners, such as the Spanish daisy, *Helenium amarum*.

Spanish daisy is an annual that has been recorded from every county in Florida except Glades, Hardee, Hendry, La Fayette, Monroe, Orange, St. Lucie, and Sumter counties (Wunderlin & Hansen (2008). It is described as common in disturbed sites (Wunderlin & Hansen 2003: 318) but I have observed it as a wild plant only once and that was long ago in 1983 along a roadside in Ruskin, Florida.

My next encounter was 27 years later in the garden center of a home improvement store, where it was being sold as a bedding annual. It was an uncommonly attractive

Above: Large plant in late spring.
Right: Depauperate plant growing in very dry, sandy soil.
Photos by Rufino Osorio.

plant with conspicuous pure yellow daisies. Once I got over the surprise of seeing a fairly obscure native Florida wildflower for sale in a big box store, I scooped up three pots and went home as pleased as any pirate with a treasure chest full of gold.

Spanish daisy grows from 2–30 inches tall depending on soil fertility, soil moisture, and genetic background, but plants are typically 8–18 inches tall. Although it is a weedy plant as is evidenced by its proclivity to colonize disturbed ground along roadsides and overgrazed pastures, it is not at all coarse or rank, and it has a tidy and refined appearance. Plants branch repeatedly and naturally tend to form rounded masses of foliage. The leaves are narrowly linear, almost threadlike, and they at once serve to distinguish Spanish daisy from the other six species of *Helianthemum* occurring in Florida. The tip of every stem ends in a bright yellow daisy with about 8 ray florets (the so-called “petals” of a daisy) and the center of the daisy is composed of numerous tiny disk florets of the same yellow color. In Texas and Oklahoma, there is a variety whose disk florets are a deep maroon-brown color, *H. amarum* var. *badium*.

Spanish daisy is extremely showy from late winter and onwards into early summer when well-grown plants will be covered with innumerable daisies. In late summer or autumn, the plants will decline, having flowered and seeded themselves to exhaustion.

As is usually the case with taprooted annuals, seeds are the only practical means of propagation. Fortunately, the tiny seeds germinate readily without any special treatments under a wide range of temperatures. As long as there is ample moisture and cool weather, the seedlings will focus on vegetative growth but, if stressed by a lack of water or if there is even a hint of warm weather, they will quickly switch to the production of as many flowers as possible. Under very

stressful conditions, plants can flower and set seeds in as little as 8 weeks (Csurhes & Zhou 2008).

As is also common with taprooted annuals, Spanish daisies resent transplanting or root disturbance. To overcome this problem, I used the following technique to introduce it into my garden: I took the three small potted plants that I purchased, and, without disturbing their roots, transplanted them into one large pot. Then I regularly watered them so that they would flower freely and set abundant seeds in the hope that the seeds would scatter and establish the



plant in suitable sites in the garden. This is in fact what happened and, in late winter and early spring, about four dozen plants came up in the yard within a few inches to several yards from the mother plants. All of the sites in which seedlings arose had sandy soil and were in full sun. Soil moisture varied from extremely dry to very wet but all had excellent drainage without standing water. Since the plants are annuals that die at the end of summer, it is important to let them go to seed and to maintain a few areas of bare soil since I saw no seedlings in areas covered by mulch or densely covered by other plants.

Spanish daisy has both positive and negative interactions with animals. On the negative side, it contains sesquiterpene lactones that are toxic to grazing animals and result in

unpalatable, bitter milk when ingested by cows (Fuller & McClintock 1986: 88), accounting for another of the plant’s common names, bitterweed. Since animals tend to avoid its distasteful foliage they generally do not eat sufficient quantities to cause poisoning. However, poisoning can result from herding animals into confined areas where bitterweed is abundant.

The plant has a much more positive association with insect pollinators. Its flowers are extremely attractive to native bees, but are not particularly attractive to honeybees. This allows native bees to gather pollen and nectar without intense competition from non-native honeybees. Spanish daisy is also visited by nectar-seeking wasps, flies, butterflies, and the occasional flower beetle. So far, there have been no signs of pests in plants growing in my yard but, in parts of its range, it is used as food by the stem-boring caterpillars of two moths, as well as a weevil that feeds on developing seeds (Hilty n.d.).

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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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