



Palmetto





Bartram's Ixia
(*Calydorea caelestina*)



When William Bartram left the Carolinas and headed out across Northeast Florida in the spring of 1774 he brought with him his incredible eye for detail and his ability to detect what was new to the world of botany. In May, somewhere near New Smyrna, he chanced upon the diminutive iris that bears his name – Bartram’s ixia (*Calydorea caelestina*). Eventually, he described and illustrated it himself (he gave it the Latin name, *Ixia caelestina*) in his now-famous *Travels* book, published in 1791. His description and his wonderful illustration of this beautiful new wildflower sparked the interest of a great many botanists and naturalists, but William was not especially good at describing the locations of his discoveries and Bartram’s ixia is notoriously good at staying out of sight.



For more than 150 years, botanists searched in vain for Bartram’s ixia. It was not until 1931 that definitive proof of its continued existence was provided in a publication by another famous Florida botanist, John Kunkel Small. It is no wonder that it took so long. Bartram’s ixia is a challenge to locate even when you know where it is supposed to be. Native to moist open savannas and flatwoods, Bartram’s ixia is a deciduous perennial that dies completely back to its tiny bulb in late fall. Should you search for it from November to February, you would find no evidence that it was present. Sometime in late winter, a single pleated leaf emerges. This is often followed by a second several weeks later, but both leaves rarely stand taller than 6 inches and are no wider than $\frac{1}{4}$ inch. Of course, they blend in

completely with the surrounding wiregrass and other herbaceous vegetation the plants occur with. Over time, the bulbs produce additional “bulblets”, but even then, the small colonies are extremely difficult to detect.

It’s not until the plants bloom that Bartram’s ixia is readily detectable. A single flower stalk is produced and it reaches its mature height of 12-16 inches by April. Only a single flower opens on any given day, but a succession of flowers are produced on this stalk for up to two months, between mid-April and mid-June. Each bloom is spectacular, and these give away the plant’s presence. Individual flowers are comprised of five large blue-violet petals with three bright yellow stamens. The dark blue style is shaped like a frilly trumpet and is almost hidden in the middle. Each flower is more than two inches across.

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Bartram's Ixia

You might believe that Bartram's ixia would be an easy plant to spot when flowering, but it is not. The flowers are exceedingly ephemeral. They open as the sun rises and they close completely, wither and disappear by about 10 a.m. My observations are that they are most often pollinated by bumblebees. Bartram's ixia also does not bloom well if the environmental conditions are not right. It responds to hydrology, for example, and seems to do best during wet springs. It also responds to fire. Like so many wildflowers native to open savannas, Bartram's ixia appears quickly following a fire and just as quickly goes semi-dormant when their habitat does not burn for several years. The plants survive for years in this condition. They just don't bloom. This may be why so many of the 60+ populations that have been reported in Florida have not been seen in recent years.

Bartram's ixia is a state-listed endangered species. It is also an endemic or near-endemic. A single population has been reported, but not verified, from southern Georgia. In Florida, it occurs only in a seven-county area just south of Jacksonville. This is a very difficult plant to hunt in the wild, especially without a guide that knows its location from previous years. It is not a difficult plant to propagate or grow, however, and it is sometimes offered by commercial sources. I have kept it in my Pinellas County landscape for many years with great success.

About the Author

Craig Huegel has a Ph.D. in Animal Ecology from Iowa State University. He is the author two books on Florida's native plants – *Native Wildflowers and Other Ground Covers for Florida Landscapes* and *Native Plant Landscaping for Florida Wildlife*, published by the University Press of Florida.



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Editorial Content

We welcome articles on native plant species and related conservation topics, as well as high-quality botanical illustrations and photographs. Contact the editor for guidelines, deadlines and other information.

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The purpose of the Florida Native Plant Society is to conserve, preserve, and restore the native plants and native plant communities of Florida.

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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