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Spiderwort in your garden won't bite

By Gail Compton | More by this reporter | Wildlife Discoveries | Posted: Saturday, May 16, 2009 ; Updated: 7:25 AM on Saturday, May 16, 2009

Everywhere you drive in north Florida in April or May, you see blue on roadsides and seldom give it a thought. The native wildflower splashing blue all over the landscape goes by the unusual name of spiderwort (Tradescantia ohiensis). It's related to the day-flower that reclines and spreads among other flowers.

Both wildflowers open in the early morning and close during the heat of midday. I allow both spiderwort and day-flower to grow in my garden and enjoy looking forward mornings to their dew-bright blues. They provide the perfect complement to all other colors and attract native bees.

Many sources attribute the origin of the name to the narrow leaves that bend and look spiderlike. But this ignores the suffix wort which is attached to many American wildflowers: St. Johns Wort, bladderwort, liverwort, mugwort. It comes from Anglo Saxon, wirt or wort, meaning a medicinal plant and was used up to the middle of the 17th Century when it gradually fell out of use.

In the case of spiderwort, the plant when crushed oozes a clear sticky fluid that was smeared on mosquito and spider bites to sooth the itch and pain. In addition, the Cherokee and other native American tribes made a tea from the plant used as a laxative and to treat stomachaches.

Spiderwort often comes up in your yard and can be easily dug up and moved to an area where you would like to have color. I usually plant them in tight groups to form large colorful clumps. Always water any plant that has been moved to help it survive the shock of having its roots exposed. Spiderwort will grow well in shade and partial sun and will tolerate sandy soils.

Each stalk bears a clump of buds and if you watch carefully, two or three of the buds open each day and bloom from early spring into May and June. When the clump of buds turns brown, simply cut the stalk back and the plant will produce new stalks and buds. This keeps the spiderwort from becoming leggy and expands the blooming time.

The St. Augustine Shores Wildflower Meadow in back of the Riverview Club has always had spiderwort in the meadow. Even when deer come early morning to browse, we let nature take its course and have learned that our native wildflowers, and especially spiderwort, thrive on regular mowing and the cropping by deer.

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