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FAIRCHILD'S TROPICAL GARDEN COLUMN

## Beggar's needle: an underappreciated Florida wildflower

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Beggar's needle daisy-like flower Kenneth Setzer / Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden

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BY KENNETH SETZER

FAIRCHILD TROPICAL BOTANIC GARDEN

You probably rip it out of your yard by the handful, but the humble beggar's needle, *Bidens alba*, is an important native Florida wildflower, supporting our pollinators and native animals. Consider the attributes of this common "weed" before you curse it from your garden.

Is it because beggar's needle grows without our cultivation or its stubborn willfulness to reappear so quickly that makes people dislike it? Maybe its growth just looks "weedy" and uncontrolled. But that is part of its appeal — it's completely carefree and self-sowing. It appears smack dab in the middle of my lawn (were it up to me, I'd prefer growing something more useful than a lawn anyway, but alas), in corners other plants reject and unkempt areas along the sunny sides of roads and buildings.

If you can allow a patch of the flowers to live for a while, or keep an area a little wild for them, the benefits are numerous. Honeybees love them! Those beleaguered insects do a lot for humans by pollinating our food plants and allowing us to partake in their miraculous and delicious honey. But they need to eat also, and *Bidens alba* is one of their favorite sources of nectar.

Butterflies also flock to the flowers for food. Our state butterfly, the zebra heliconian (*Heliconius charithonia*), relies on it for both nectar and pollen. By consuming pollen, heliconians acquire amino acids; researchers believe this is the key that allows them to live for many months, much longer than most butterflies. Other butterflies, such as the monarch and gulf fritillary, are also reported to use beggar's needle as a food source.

*Bidens alba* goes by many common names: beggar's needle, Spanish needle, beggar ticks, shepherd's needle, tickseed, and pitchfork weed. The last one, though I haven't heard it in use, supposedly describes the plant's prickly fork-shaped seed with its two prongs for hitching a ride on animals happening by — including humans of course. It's obviously a very effective method for seed dispersal, for however vigorously and often people pluck these plants, they keep returning.

Beggar's needle is in the aster family (Asteraceae), along with thousands of other plants like echinacea, the common daisy, sunflowers and even the bane of more temperate lawns — the dandelion. Its flowers do resemble daisies, are about a half inch across and produce creamy white petals surrounding the deep yellow center. Many other members of the aster family are commonly consumed vegetables; they are certainly a very successful group of plants.

Beggar's needle is an annual, or short-lived perennial, prefers lots of sun and while it doesn't seem to mind dry conditions, thrives after lots of rain.

The plants can reach four to five feet or taller. They grow prolifically around the world in tropical and subtropical environments, no doubt thanks to the massive amounts of seeds each plant can produce.

I've seen lots of anecdotal references to the edibility of beggar's needle flowers and young leaves, but until I read it in a very reliable source on edible plants, I would refrain from eating them. Beggar's needle may also yield medicinal benefits in the future as well.

This humble, under-appreciated plant might soon be vindicated. In the meantime, it makes for an easy addition to a butterfly garden. Just keep it trimmed and under control and watch the wildlife flock to it.

Kenneth Setzer is writer and editor at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden

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