

Spanish Needles

Bidens alba

Bidens alba and the nearly identical *Bidens pilosa* are some of the hardest native forbs, superheroes in the natural plant world.

“This is the most important wildflower nectar source in Florida and is sought out by most pollinators,” according to the Florida Wildflowers Growers Cooperative. “It is a very important pollen species and host plant to many butterflies.”

It is the third most common reliable source of nectar in Florida. The second most common nectar producer is the Saw Palmetto and the top producer is non-native citrus.

But *B. alba* doesn't get any respect. If there were a contest for under appreciated plants, it would be the champion.

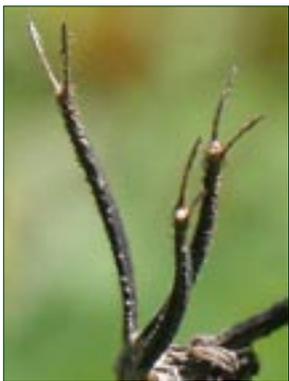
Ask anyone about *Bidens alba* and those who know it will say it's annoying weed. But honey production everywhere relies heavily upon it.

Bidens is in the Aster family, a relative of the sunflower, with a root that goes vertical rather than horizontal.

There are hundreds of *Bidens* species. Common names include Spanish Needles, Shepherd's Needles, Butterfly Needles, Stickseeds, Tickseed Sunflowers, and Pitchfork Weed. The latter is because its seed usually has two prongs, *right*, that help it stick to almost anything. “*Bidens*” means two-toothed and *alba* means white.

Spanish Needles is a short-lived perennial herb with erect and ridged one to four foot tall stems emerging from a strong taproot.

The seedlings initially put out simple, long-stalked, opposite leaves with depressed midveins. As the plants get older, they produce upper foliage with compound leaves composed of three to nine saw toothed oval leaflets. The leaves are bright green on top and a little hairy on the underside.



As the season progresses, the major branches tend to sprawl and root at the lower nodes where they touch the ground. The one inch flowers, which grow in stalked clusters, look like coarse daisies with five white rays and pale yellow centers.

The long ribbed seeds resemble flat black needles with two to six barbed hooks at each end. They are borne in loose round clusters. In the tropics, shepherd's needles stays green year round, but grows and flowers most actively when the weather is hot and rainfall is plentiful

It is a fast spreading plant; a single plant is capable of producing over 1,200 seeds, which maintain viability for at least three to five years and germinate readily. Seeds may be spread by wind or water but are most often dispersed by people or animals who get the seeds caught in their clothing or fur. Seedlings are usually abundant wherever plants have grown.

On its own, Spanish Needles will take over any unmown spot and populate it with as many *Bidens* per square foot as possible.

Spanish Needles is sometimes planted in butterfly gardens or wildflower meadows, and seeds and plants can be purchased commercially. But they can be attained for free by collecting seeds or transplanting. At one time, they were considered for commercial farming, but since they are so abundant in the wild, that wasn't economically feasible. Even so, most people unfortunately regard it as a native invasive species and treat it like a weed

According to Green Deane on his web site EatTheWeeds.com, in South Africa, Zulus and Indians eat the fresh or dried leaves. They are boiled in a little water and eaten alone or with



cornmeal when more palatable and nutritious foods are scarce.

Researchers recommend against eating the leaves raw because of a high saponin content. But as a potherb, leaves are excellent with many fine qualities: they are available all year round, keep very well, and don't reduce in size when cooked. Cooked texture is good and they store well. Wine made from *Bidens* is called *sinitsit*. The dried leaves of the *B. alba* also make a good tobacco substitute.

As for the medical implications, in 1991 Egyptian researchers documented *B. pilosa* had antimicrobial activity against a wide array of bacteria including salmonella, staphylococcus, neisseria gonorrhoea, klebsiella pneumonia, and against tuberculosis. It is also good for malaria, snake bite and has anti-leukemia activity. Research shows it lowers blood sugar and blood pressure, stimulates the immune system and is anti-inflammatory. Powdered seeds are a topical anesthetic and aid clotting.

B. alba will thrive, flower, and reseed profusely, and no native plant attracts more butterflies. Spanish Needles just need a little respect.