
Wildflower Spot – August 2017
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

SPANISH NEEDLES

Bidens bipinnata

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The common name comes from the striking arrangement of long, slender, needle-like dry fruits in round seed heads. The flower heads are yellow, but small, ½ inch across, with only a few rays. Bright green leaves are fern-like, divided many times and sit opposite each other on the stem. These are weedy plants growing 1-4 feet high, with strongly veined, square stems.

The size of the plant depends on its growing conditions. While it likes a fertile, loamy soil, somewhat moist, this plant can adapt to a wide range of environmental conditions, as long as there is dappled sunlight – it wilts in full sun. An annual, blooming for only one season, Spanish Needles spreads by reseeding itself.

Native to southeastern United States, it grows in every county in the state of Virginia. Other members of the genus *Bidens* prefer wetter habitats, and the leaves and flowers are different, the fruits broad, not needle-like. This is not a plant usually sold in nurseries for the home garden, but it can be

common along roadsides or as a weed in cultivated fields. Some nurseries offer seeds and seedlings of other members of this genus.

This aster has both ray and disk flowers that attract bees, flies, and the cabbage white butterfly. Blooming from August through October, the nectar and pollen feeds insects that are active late in the season.

Native Americans found uses for this plant. The Cherokee chewed the leaves for sore throat and used a leaf tea to expel worms.

The genus name *Bidens* means “two teeth,” referring to the barbed points on the fruits that will stick into anything passing by, fur of animals and clothing of people. “Sticktight” is another common name. ❖



Photo: Spanish Needles (*Bidens pinnata*) taken by Helen Hamilton
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