



VIRGINIA SPIDERWORT

Tradescantia virginiana L.
plant symbol = TRVI

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Smithsonian Institution, Dept of Botany
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Alternate names

Common spiderwort, dayflower, flower-of-a-day, Job's tears, snake-grass, spider-lily, trinity, trinity-lily, widow's-tears

Uses

Ethnobotanic: The Cherokee and other Native American tribes used Virginia spiderwort for various food and medicinal purposes. The young leaves were eaten as salad greens or were mixed with other greens and then either fried or boiled until tender. The plant was mashed and rubbed onto insect bites to relieve pain and itching. A paste, made from the mashed roots, was used as a poultice to treat cancer. A tea made from the plant was used as a laxative and to treat stomachaches associated with overeating. Virginia spiderwort was one of the seven ingredients in a tea used to treat "female ailments or rupture." It was also combined with several other ingredients in a medicine for kidney trouble.

Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's current status (e.g. threatened or endangered species, state noxious status, and wetland indicator values).

Description

General: Spiderwort Family (Commelinaceae). Virginia spiderwort is a native, perennial forb. This plant was probably named for the delicate spider web-like filaments that surround the anthers of the flower or the threadlike secretion that emerges from the stem upon cutting. The lightly fragrant flowers (2 to 5.4 cm in diameter) grow in terminal clusters. The flower's three broadly ovate petals are generally bright blue but are sometimes purple, violet, rose, and rarely white. Individual blossoms last for only one or two days, but new blossoms appear daily throughout the spring blooming period. The plants grow in erect clumps that range from 30 to 60 cm in height. The rounded stalks are either single or branched at the base. The roots are thick and fleshy. The plant spreads through underground stems or stolons to form large colonies. The smooth iris-like leaves are long (15 to 46 cm) and narrow (2.5 cm wide) with a prominent midrib.

Distribution: For current distribution, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Web site.

Habitat: Virginia spiderwort can be found in moist prairies, fertile woodlands, open woods, meadows, hillsides, stony bluffs, stream banks, and along roadsides.

Establishment

Virginia spiderwort is a vigorous plant that likes moist soils but will adapt to drier, average garden soils. The plants are often seen in old-fashioned gardens and work well as part of a perennial border. They are recommended for bogs and naturally wet sites where the plants can form large clumps when grown in full sun. The plants will flower in both sun and shade. Plants may be propagated from seed but they are more easily started from cuttings or divisions. For cuttings, take a single-node stem cutting late in the season, just as the plants begin to bolt. Place the cutting in moist soil up to the base of the leaf. To propagate by division, divide the thick roots in the fall or early in the spring. Be careful to divide the leaves so that each section includes its own roots. Established plants will self-sow and stalks that lay on the ground will readily root from the nodes.

Management

The foliage may be partially clipped back after blooming to control the size and untidy appearance of the plant. The plants will flower a second time in the late summer or fall if the stems are removed soon

after the first flowering period. This vigorous grower can be somewhat controlled by dividing the plants every two to four years and by regularly removing the stalks that slump to the ground before they have the opportunity to take root. Large clumps may be divided by first lifting the root mass from the soil with a shovel. Then divide the clump into pieces that contain four to six shoots each with roots attached. Immediately plant and water the divisions.

Pests and Potential Problems

Virginia spiderwort is relatively pest and disease free. Snails will eat the young shoots.

Cultivars, Improved and Selected Materials (and area of origin)

These plant materials are somewhat available from commercial sources.

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