

# FGCU Food Forest

## Plant Database

### Spanish Needle (*Bidens alba*)

#### Quick Facts

**Origin:** Tropical America

**Description:** Spanish needle or "butterfly needles" is a weedy annual or short-lived perennial herb with erect and ridged 1-4 ft tall stems emerging from a strong taproot.

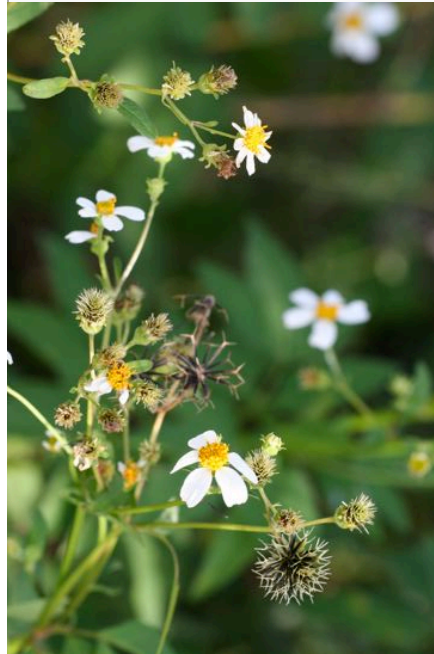
**Uses:** Landscaping and medicinal.

**Harvest:** Flowers most actively when the weather is hot and rainfall is plentiful.

**Flower:** The 1 in flowers, which grow in stalked clusters, look like coarse daisies with five white rays and pale yellow centers.

**Tolerance:** Spanish needle thrives in gardens, farm fields, and disturbed sites. Spanish needle does best in rich loose soil with lots of organic matter, but grows well on sand and limerock too. Is killed by heavy frost.

**General Description:** Spanish needle or "butterfly needles" is a weedy annual or short-lived perennial herb with erect and ridged 1-4 ft tall stems emerging from a strong taproot. As the plants get older, they produce upper foliage with compound leaves composed of 3-9 saw toothed oval leaflets. The leaves are 1-5 long and up to 2.5 in wide, bright green on top and 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 1 in flowers, which grow in stalked clusters, look like coarse daisies with five white rays and pale yellow centers. The 0.25-0.5 in long ribbed seeds resemble flat black needles with 2-6 barbed hooks at each



end.

- **Native Origin:** Spanish needle, *Bidens alba*, comes from tropical America, but it spread to Asia and the Pacific many years ago and is now widely naturalized throughout the tropics and subtropics everywhere in the world.
- **General History:** Much confusion reigns whether *B. alba* and *B. pilosa* are the same or different species. Historically, they have been misclassified as each other/the same species over the years. One can find both references, and combinations as in *B. pilosa* var. *alba*. A 2006 genetic study showed they are separate species, even if the difference is little. So, how can we tell them apart (though it makes little difference as both are eaten.) *B. alba* is the larger and better (I use “Big Al” to help me remember.) Its blossom petals are usually a centimeter long or longer, and it has five to eight petals. Think of the *B. pilosa* as smaller and lesser. Its petals are under a centimeter in length, usually 8 mm or less. It has four to seven petals, or none at all. Sometimes the geography helps. In Brazil, for example, *B. alba* grows only on the coast and *B. pilosa* inland, at higher elevations. Realistically, the differences mean little to us as they are both edible.
- **Distribution:** This plant is found in tropical and subtropical regions of North America, Asia, South America, and Africa. It is often situated in gardens, road sides, farm fields and disturbed sites. It is very prevalent in South Florida.
- **Season of Harvest:** *Bidens alba* blooms in April, May, June, July, August, September, and October. Spanish needle is a fast spreading weed. A single plant is capable of producing 3,000-6,000 seeds, which maintain viability for at least 3-5 years and germinate readily. They may be spread by wind or water, but are most often dispersed by people or animals who get the little seeds caught in their clothing or fur. It is seldom necessary to intentionally propagate Spanish needles.
- **Uses:** This is a wonderful attraction for butterflies and honey-bees. You can consume the fresh or dried leaves by boiling them or eating the young leaves fresh. Some studies indicate that this plant can be used as a remedy for cuts, swelling, hypertension, jaundice, and diabetes. *B. alba* also has therapeutic value for human colorectal cancer.

Spanish Needle	
Scientific Classification	
Kingdom:	Plantae
(unranked):	Angiosperms
(unranked):	Eudicots
(unranked):	Asterids
Order:	Asterales
Family:	Asteraceae

Genus: *Bidens*

Species: ***B. alba***

### **Sources**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bidens\\_alba](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bidens_alba)

<http://mobile.floridata.com/Plants/Asteraceae/Bidens%20alba/898>

[http://www.wildflower.org/plants/result.php?id\\_plant=BIAL](http://www.wildflower.org/plants/result.php?id_plant=BIAL)

<http://www.eattheweeds.com/spanish-needles-pitchfork-weed/>

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