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## The Wildflower Garden: Showy Milkwort

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*Polygala violacea* (synonym: *Polygala grandiflora*) (Polygalaceae) is a tiny, but showy, herbaceous perennial commonly found in a variety of sunny habitats throughout Florida. Its horticultural attributes and cultivation are discussed.

KEYWORDS: *Polygala*, Polygalaceae, Florida, native plant, perennial, wildflower.

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*Polygala* is a large, worldwide genus whose members are commonly known as *milkworts*, a name based on the mistaken belief that the plants increased milk production in cattle. The genus is well-represented in Florida with 23 species, all of which are native. Florida's milkworts are annuals, biennials, or perennials but elsewhere certain milkworts are woody shrubs or even, as in *Polygala cowellii* of Puerto Rico, rather large trees growing up to 40 feet tall. The flowers of Florida's milkworts are individually small. Nonetheless, many are extremely showy as a result of the flowers possessing bright colors and being profusely borne in dense spikes.

Additionally, the flowers are interesting as a result of their complex and intricate form.

In spite of our many attractive species, Florida's milkworts are essentially unknown in cultivation. This is due to several characteristics that makes their cultivation difficult. First, a large number of species are annuals or biennials that require moist or wet, often acidic, sandy soils in order to prosper. These species greatly resent root disturbance and are practically impossible to transplant successfully or to propagate vegetatively. Therefore, they must be established from seed sown where the plants are to grow—assuming, of course, that there is a moist, sandy, acidic spot in one's yard. Secondly, the seed capsules are tiny, contain only two seeds, and each flower spike matures only a few capsules at any one time. Thus, it is not easy to gather enough seed to raise enough plants to give these species a fair trial in the garden. In contrast, the perennial species are more easily cultivated as they often grow under drier conditions, are not nearly as sensitive to transplanting, and, once established in the garden, will usually self-sow with relative ease. Unfortunately, as is usually the case in such matters, the most brilliantly colorful species are to be found among the difficult to grow annuals.

Of all our milkworts, *Polygala grandiflora* is reliably perennial and is by far the easiest milkwort to grow. It is a dwarf plant that normally reaches 6-12 inches in height, including the elongated spikes of pink or rosy flowers. It is one of our most common species and has been recorded in every county in Florida, where it occurs in a wide variety of open, lightly shaded to sunny habitats including sandhills, pine flatwoods, and woodland edges. In addition to natural areas, it may just as readily be found in areas affected by human disturbance and I have found it growing in such unlikely places as sidewalk cracks in West Palm Beach and in a hibiscus hedge at the local Winn-Dixie supermarket in Lake Worth.

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The species epithet, *grandiflora*, means “large-flowered” but, with an average width of less than half an inch, the flowers are large only in relation to those of certain other milkwort species. *Polygala grandiflora* is known by various common names, most of which allude in one way or another to its *big* flowers. One common name is *showy milkwort* and the species epithet would imply a large-flowered and showy plant, but this is a misleading common name since, as mentioned above, there exist far showier and brighter colored milkworts within the same range as *Polygala grandiflora*. Another common name is *big-flowered candyroot*. The roots cannot be eaten like candy; however, the damaged roots, like those of several other milkworts, do have a sharp and distinctively spicy wintergreen-like fragrance.

Usually unfairly overlooked because it is so common, *Polygala grandiflora* assumes a quaint and subtle beauty in the garden where cultivated plants may be in continuous bloom from earliest spring to late autumn, or even year round in southern Florida. It is a surprisingly variable plant. At one extreme, there exist tall forms that do not branch readily, have narrow leaves, and bear very long spikes of flowers. Such tall forms are exceedingly graceful and elegant and the pink flowers seem to float above the plant. At the other extreme, there are wide-leaved, readily branching stocky plants that form little rounded “shrublets.” The latter make excellent little pot plants—the tall forms are too wispy to make good pot plants—and they may be thickly planted to make a dwarf groundcover or planted in a row as a miniature border. Of course, between these two extremes there exists every conceivable intermediate form and combination of characters.

Regardless as to growth habit, *Polygala grandiflora* is easily cultivated and will slowly but reliably spread from self-sown seeds to form showy patches in the garden. For a very attractive effect, *Polygala grandiflora* can be combined with other low-growing native wildflowers such as blue-eyed grasses (*Sisyrinchium* species), pineland heliotrope (*Heliotropium polyphyllum*), and yellow star-grasses (*Hypoxis* species). In time, showy milkwort casually spreads into the most unexpected places and I have seen it pop up in my potted plants, in the driveway, and among low groundcovers. Yet, unlike larger and coarser plants, these self-sown plants are always welcome and never seem to be out of place.

*Polygala grandiflora* is rarely bothered by pests although I have observed occasional seed capsules with the pupa of a lilliputian moth whose caterpillar has made a meal of the seeds. This moth is not a serious threat in view of the widespread and common occurrence of this plant and it is a marvel of nature that this tiny moth can reach full maturity on a meal consisting solely of the two little seeds contained in a single capsule of this plant.

#### TAXONOMIC UPDATE

The article above was published in 2004 in *The Palmetto*, the journal of the Florida Native Plant Society. Since then, an earlier name for the showy milkwort has been found, *Polygala violacea*, and, in accordance with the rules of botanical nomenclature, the name *Polygala violacea* supersedes the name *Polygala grandiflora*, which was used in the article.

**NOTE:** This is the author's PDF version of an article published in *The Palmetto*, the journal of the Florida Native Plant Society. The PDF and print versions differ substantially in formatting, pagination, and imagery. Additionally, the content of the PDF version has been slightly modified from the print version in order to correct minor grammatical errors and a taxonomic update to the original article has been provided. The original print version may be cited as:

Osorio, R. 2004. The Wildflower Garden: Showy Milkwort. *The Palmetto* 22(4):10.

This PDF version may be cited as:

Osorio, R. 2009. The Wildflower Garden: Showy Milkwort. Internet: [http://www.rufino-osorio.com/articles/polygala\\_violacea.pdf](http://www.rufino-osorio.com/articles/polygala_violacea.pdf).

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