

## Miniature Native Plants: *Stenandrium dulce* var. *floridanum*

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*Stenandrium dulce* (Acanthaceae) is a tiny, but showy, herbaceous perennial with a rosette growth habit somewhat similar to an African-violet. Its horticultural attributes and cultivation are discussed.

KEYWORDS: *Stenandrium*, Acanthaceae, Florida, native plant, perennial, wildflower.

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The Acanthus Family (Acanthaceae) forms a large assemblage of approximately 2,500 species found throughout the tropics with a few species extending into temperate areas. The tropical nature of this family is easily confirmed by a few statistics. The whole of the northeastern United States, with an area of land much exceeding that of the state of Florida, contains only about 10 species of Acanthaceae. However, there are about twice as many native species in Florida. Although of little practical utility, the family is especially rich in horticulturally attractive species, with many possessing variegated foliage and/or colorful bracts that contrast beautifully with the attractive flowers.

All of the most dramatically beautiful species are truly tropical and none are native to Florida. However, in south-central and southern Florida there is found a diminutive member of this family that combines great charm with colorful flowers. This is *Stenandrium dulce* var. *floridanum*, a member of a genus of about 30 species confined to the subtropics and tropics of the New World.

In the wild, these plants form 5 cm (2 inch) wide rosettes of attractive dark green leaves at ground level. The flowers are borne in spikes carried at the top of leafless stems (technically referred to as scapes). The flowering spikes are rigidly erect when young, but they often become elongated and rest on the ground with age. The beautiful clear pink to dark rose flowers are about 2.5 cm (1 inch) in diameter and they are borne one or two at a time at the tip of the spike over a long period.

This species takes well to cultivation and should be grown in rather large containers in order to accommodate its robust root system. For maximum development, plants need to be grown in full sun in

a rich but well-drained soil mix, watered regularly, and fertilized every few months. Under such conditions, the plants luxuriate and form multiple rosettes that can bear as many as four flowering scapes simultaneously. Unfortunately, the flowers open in the morning and last just a few hours, although they may linger until late afternoon on overcast days or in cool weather. However, they are freely produced and well-tended plants open a few flowers nearly every week of the year except in the very coldest months.

Even isolated plants will set seed capsules. Thus, they are self-fertile. Whether or not they are self-pollinating is not clear. The capsules open explosively and hurl the seeds for some distance, making the collection of seeds quite difficult. Such self-sown seeds serve to spread this little plant throughout the garden, but the plants are not at all weedy. Indeed, they seem to establish themselves only in open ground where competition from other plants is at a minimum. Left to their own devices, these self-sown seedlings have been very slow growing, the little plants seemingly dedicating themselves to the establishment of a strong root system during their first year or two. They are not fools and they seem to know that Florida's fickle weather may bring a drought at any time!

Since this little plant is unfamiliar to many Floridians, a few words regarding its natural habitat might be appropriate here. Plants were found growing in clearings in sandy pinelands in a county park in Palm Beach County. The soil was very poor and no large plants were growing near the *stenandriums*. Associates consisted of equally tiny plants including *Dyschoriste angusta* and *Evolvulus sericeus*. The site evidently was maintained in an open state through periodic fires since there were numerous signs of a recent fire including much charred plant debris. Thus, it appears that this species can survive fires. The above comments are

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based solely on the observation of two populations at one site and may not be applicable to populations of this species elsewhere in Florida.

UPDATE TO THE ORIGINAL  
PRINT VERSION OF 1991

Since the above was published in *The Palmetto* in 1991, the following new information has become available:

- The Florida plants are now called *Stenandrium dulce* (without the varietal epithet *floridanum*) and it is generally agreed that they are not varietally distinct from other plants of *Stenandrium dulce* growing outside of Florida.
- Members of the Miami-Dade chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society refer to the plant as *pine pinklet*, and that has become its widely accepted common name.
- I have observed plants growing under deep shade and remarks concerning its need for full sun are erroneous. *Stenandrium dulce* will grow under a wide range of light conditions and its true requirement is freedom from competition from other plants.
- It makes an ideal houseplant and is able to tolerate low light levels and much adversity when grown as such.



**Figure 1.** *Stenandrium dulce*, pine pinklet, growing with two equally diminutive wildflowers in the author's garden: in the lower left the leaf of a wild violet (*Viola affinis*) can be seen and in the lower right is the foliage of Virginia snakeroot (*Aristolochia serpentaria*).

**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 an update to the original article has been provided. The original print version may be cited as:

Osorio, R. 1991. Miniature Native Plants: *Stenandrium dulce* var. *floridanum*. *The Palmetto* 11(1):3.

This PDF version may be cited as:

Osorio, R. 2009. Miniature Native Plants: *Stenandrium dulce*. Internet: [http://www.rufino-osorio.com/articles/stenandrium\\_dulce.pdf](http://www.rufino-osorio.com/articles/stenandrium_dulce.pdf).

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