Tarflower (*Bejaria racemosa*): Distribution and Identification

Stephen H. Brown, Lee County Horticulture Agent
Kim Cooprider, Lee County Master Gardener

Early July

Early June

Common Names: Tar flower, fly catcher, fly weed

Synonyms (discarded names): *Befaria racemosa*
Origin: Florida, Georgia
U.S.D.A. Zone: 8a-10 (10ºF minimum)
Plant Type: Long-lived perennial shrub
Growth Rate: Slow
Leaf Persistence: Evergreen
Flowering Months: Winter-spring
Flower Color: White, tinged with pink
Light Requirements: Full sun to partial shade
Soil and Salt Spray Tolerances: Low
Drought Tolerance: High once established
Soil Requirements: Well-drained, sandy
Nutritional Requirements: Low
Major Potential Pests: None
Typical Dimensions: 4-8 feet tall by 2-6 feet wide
Propagation: Seeds and cuttings
Human Hazards: None
Uses: Flowering shrub, natural landscape, habitat restoration, specimen plant

Distribution

Tar flower (*Bejaria racemosa*) is a member of the Ericaceae family and is native to southeast Georgia and throughout Florida except the western panhandle and the Florida Keys. It is a fairly common shrub found along coastal plains, and in both wet pine flatwoods and well-drained sand-scrubs. Companion plants in those locations include American beautyberry, fetterbush, Florida rosemary, saw palmettos, slash pine, wax myrtle and winged sumac.

Source of Common Name

Tar flower takes its common name from the sticky exudate on the stems holding up the flowers, the outside of the petals and sepals (calyx) and on the fresh fruit. The extremely sticky fluid often captures insects that happen to touch them. Tar flower was used in the past as flypaper, hung indoors to catch flies and other insects.

Plants in bloom. Pine flatwood. Early June

Card sticks to petal

Capsule to thumb

Sticking capsules

Growth Habit

This is a woody evergreen perennial shrub growing to about 10 feet tall and about half that in width. It has relatively few stiff, slender and erect branches. The leaves and stems are covered with rough, firm, stiff hairs. While the younger portions with softer hairs. The lower woody limb measures about 2.5 inches in diameter and is often prostrated to the ground. Horizontal limbs frequently produce upright stems that enhance the plant's dimension and visibility. Like many flatwood and scrub plants, it remains largely obscured until it flowers at which time it is easily recognized.

Small shrub

Older hairy stem

Upright stems from horizontal wood

Leaves

Leaves are alternate, entire, leathery and mostly upright. They are sessile (no petioles) or with very short petioles. The blades are narrowly to broadly elliptic to ovate, occasional one is oblanceolate or obovate. They may be flat, twisted or slightly curved, and are hairless although a few hairs may be present on the bottom of the midrib. The blades are typically 1.3 to 2.3 inches long and 0.3 to 1.6 inches wide. The petioles, if present, are about 0.1 inches long. Mature leaves are mid to dark green above, with faint lateral veins. The young leaves are sometimes reddish.

Hairy stem and alternate leaves

Leaf shape variations

Upright leaves

Flowers and Fruits

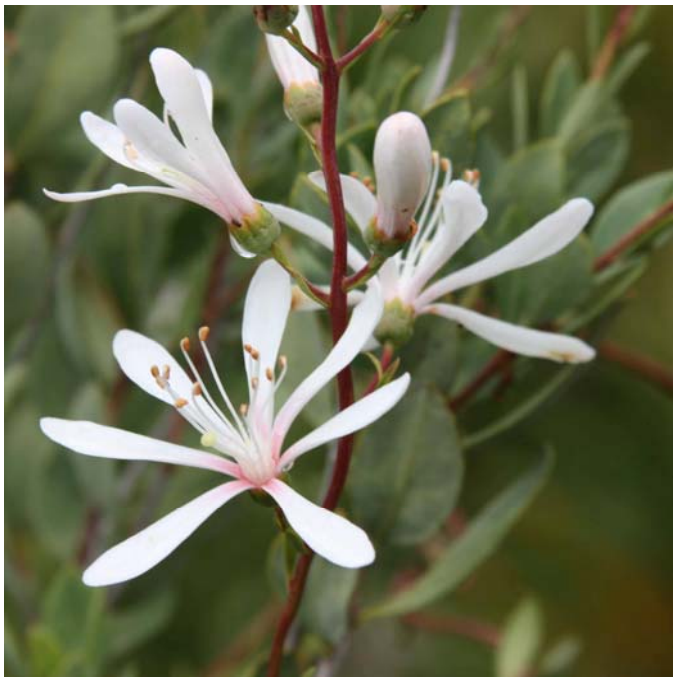
Plants from seedlings bloom at an early age. May and June are the peak blooming months in South Florida and less so in July. The distinctive flowers are sticky, lightly fragrant, plentiful and conspicuous. They are borne on long upright racemes or panicles on current season growth. Flowers consist of seven widely spaced petals which are white, pink, or white with pink lines. The petals are spatulate to oblanceolate and 0.75 to 1.25 inches long. There are 12 to 14 long protruding stamens in each flower.

The fruits are sticky, globose capsules produced in abundance at the end of stems. They are about 0.4 inches in diameter. The pistils persist on the maturing capsules for some time. The slender pistils and fruit stalks are about 0.75 inches long. Flowers and maturing capsules appear simultaneously on the same blooming stem. After the pistils have fallen, the dried capsules turn dark brown and split into seven equal parts to release many seeds. Some dried fruits may remain on the plants beyond the winter.

Flower buds on raceme, Late June

Flowers and capsules. Early June

Maturing capsules with persistent pistils. Late June



Early June

Early June

Late May

Maintenance Considerations

This plant is challenging to propagate, either by seeds or by cuttings. It may be difficult to locate from native plant nurseries. It is also difficult to establish (properly rooted) from pot to ground. A member of the blueberry family, it prefers acid soils. In Lee County, tarflowers are generally found growing in natural areas in soils with pH's between 4 and 5. Plant it in full sun to light shade in a soil with excellent drainage. Tarflower roots cannot tolerate water saturation for any length of time. Establishment may take a year or longer and the plant requires regular deep watering until then. Place mulch around the plant no more than two inches deep but avoid making mulch stem contact. Do not use a string weed trimmer around the plant.

Once established it requires no supplemental watering except during periods of sustained drought. To encourage a bushier shrub, prune it after flowering anytime from August through October. Leaf spots may be prominent during the winter months. Although a plant of low soil fertility, it may require supplemental iron and magnesium fertilizer when grown in alkaline soils or in soils with deficiency in those plant nutrients.

References

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Useful Links

List and links to Florida Native Plants Fact Sheets
Bay Cedar
Coontie
Jamaican Caper
Leafless Beaked Ladies' Tresses Orchid
Pigeon Plum
Seagrape
Sea Lavender

YouTube Channel

Lee County Extension Landscape Homepage

All pictures were taken by Stephen H. Brown

This fact sheet was reviewed by Peggy Cruz, Horticulture Specialist, Lee County Extension; Pat Rooney, Lee County Master Gardener and Dr. Craig Huegel, Hawthorn Hill Nursery, Seminole, Florida.

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