

Richland Soil and Water Conservation District

Plant of the Month

Written by Mary Hannah Lindsay, RSWCD Education Program Assistant

The month of April signifies a new beginning. There is no time like now to get outdoors to take in everything nature has to offer, from the sun's rich warmth to the colorful blossoms of spring flowers. One such spring flower appears as specks of indigo blue and lavender purple nestled in starbursts of olive green. These specks are the flowers of spiderwort, *Tradescantia ohiensis*.

Both native and perennial, spiderwort is considered a forb, which is any broad-leaved, herbaceous, non-woody plant with showy flowers. Other examples of forbs include sunflowers and daylilies. This wildflower's blossoms are most commonly blue or purple, but can also be white. The flowers have three petals, and form in clusters.

At first glance, the unattractive name "spiderwort" seems mismatched with this flower's delicately beautiful appearance. However, the plant's blade-like leaves are mucilaginous, and string into fine threads when split apart. It is thought that these fine threads resemble a spider's web. Additionally, there is a resemblance between spiderwort's leaves and the legs of a spider. "Wort" is derived from "wyrht," meaning herb or root in old English.

Spiderwort is a specious plant, with nearly 70 documented species. *Tradescantia ohiensis* is found throughout the Eastern United States, and thrives in Richland County. The plant has a rich history, particularly throughout Cherokee culture. Nearly every part of spiderwort has been used for food or medicine. The root was once mashed and turned into a paste to treat wounds. The seeds, though bitter, were roasted and eaten. The flowers were powdered and used as a snuff to treat nosebleeds, and they can still serve as an edible garnish on a salad. Spiderwort leaves are edible when young and can be tossed into salad greens after being boiled or fried. The aloe-like mucus from the leaves can be spread on insect bites to relieve itching.

Beyond food or medicine, the stamen of spiderwort flowers is extremely sensitive to radiation, and when exposed, transition from a deep blue to a bright pink. Due to this property, spiderwort has been planted near nuclear plants in Japan to warn of radiation exposure before



dangerous levels are reached. Radiation destroys the genetic material responsible for the dominant blue pigmentation of the hair along spiderwort's stamen. The number of pink (damaged) hairs along the stamen is proportional to the severity of radiation damage. This reaction takes place within a couple of weeks after exposure, whereas it would take years to see a radiation-induced mutation in a human population.

Spiderwort makes a great addition to a garden, as it can bloom year-round in a temperate climate like South Carolina's. A member of the dayflower family, spiderwort is ephemeral, meaning individual flowers only open completely for one day, even though a plant can host blossoms for up to eight weeks. It prefers a dry to somewhat moist, well-drained soil, and can tolerate the sun or shade. Though snails can be found slithering along the spiderwort leaves, it is relatively pest and disease free. In terms of pollinators, the spiderwort flower is sure to attract bees with its slightly sweet fragrance. It is most commonly used as a border plant, and is most striking when grown en masse.

At a time that may feel very unsure, it is best to rely on a plant that will succeed with beauty and ease in just about any garden habitat. Look for spiderwort as it begins to spring up around Richland County, and remember the words of composer Gustav Mahler: "With the coming of spring, I am calm again."

