

# Common Beggar's Tick - *Bidens alba*

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*Bidens alba*, in the Aster (sunflower) family, is a common weed or wildflower, depending on your viewpoint. Commonly known as Beggar's Tick, or simply Bidens, it is considered native to Florida and subtropical regions of the Southeastern United States, and is considered naturalized or invasive in tropical and subtropical parts of Asia, South America and Africa. Recently it has been reported as naturalized on many islands in the South Pacific, including Hawaii.

## General Information

Beggar's Tick is an annual, herbaceous plant that is killed by frosts and freezes. In tropical regions, it may be a short-lived perennial. Each plant produces 1200 or more seeds, making control difficult. The seeds over-winter and begin germinating when the weather warms in spring, typically in May. Because of the abundance of seeds that germinate easily, the Florida Native Plant Society says that "Once you have this plant, you will always have this plant."

## Description

*Bidens* grows to a maximum height of between 3 and 4 feet, with an erect growth habit. Its simple or trifoliate leaves are 1 to 4 inches long and are borne opposite on the stem. The underside of the leaves have hairs, but the top is typically smooth. The leaf margins are toothed and are variously lobed. (Figure 1)



Figure 1. The leaves of *Bidens alba* typically are trifoliate and have fine toothings along the margins.

The flowers are typical of those in the Asteraceae (sunflower) family. What is typically perceived as one flower is actually made up of numerous fertile and non-fertile florets (small flowers). The non-fertile florets have a petal-like appearance, and give the *Bidens* flower a 'daisy-like' appearance. The non-fertile florets are white to creamy-white in color and are arranged around a central core of fertile florets which have functional reproductive organs. The fertile florets are typically a yellow to golden color. (Figure 2.)

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After pollination, the fertile florets produce the plant's numerous seeds. Each seed is about one-half inch in length and about 1/32 inch in width. The seed's distinguishing features are a pair of barb-like bristles on one end that allow the seed to attach to animals or people that come into contact with it. The barbs ensure the wide dispersal of the seeds (Figure 3).



Figure 2. The white and yellow flowers of *Bidens alba* are a popular nectar and pollen source for bees.

## Culture

*Bidens* grows best in organic, loose soil but can grow in almost all conditions. It can grow in full sun to partial shade and tolerates low water conditions. It is a fast growing, fast spreading plant due to the large number of seeds produced and because of its ability to root and regrow from stems.

## Cultural Use

Beggars's Tick is one of the most important wildflowers as an nectar and pollen source for many species of bees, wasps and butterflies. It

also serves as a larval host for the Dainty Sulfur butterfly.

*Bidens* has served as food source for humans. It has a nutrient profile similar to kale and is high in fiber, proteins, carotenoids, folate (a B-vitamin) and magnesium. The younger shoots and leaves prove best for harvesting. As the plant ages, the older leaves accumulate higher levels of saponins which give them a bitter taste and may cause stomach upset. The dried leaves of *B. alba* have also been used as a substitute for tobacco.

*Bidens* also has been shown to have broad-spectrum antimicrobial properties. It also has been shown to have antidiabetic, anti-dysenteric, anti-inflammatory, astringent, and styptic properties. Please remember that it is best to consult your doctor about any symptoms or conditions you have and to discuss the use of herbal supplements.



Figure 3. The distinctive, double-tipped seed of *Bidens alba* give it its common name of Beggar's Tick.