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### **Weed or not to weed?**

The Beggar Tick Daisy, also called Spanish Needles, is a plant familiar to every resident of Highlands County. It thrives, as the plant guides say, in roadsides and “waste places.” Highlands County has plenty of those, although ecologists prefer the term “disturbed areas” to “waste places.” It grows even better in a neglected area of the garden. Mark Deyrup, entomologist at the Archbold Biological Station, knows this too well. “If I leave home for a month in summer, by the time I return Beggar Tick Daisies that were almost too small to notice are five feet tall. When I try to pull them up I can pull a back muscle, or the plant breaks off at the base, or both. The broken plant recovers faster than my back.”

The Beggar Tick Daisy is also well known for its seeds, which have a pair of spines that get caught in the fur of animals, or in the socks and pants of humans. When the seeds are pulled off they are usually in a new site some distance from the parent plants. If they are not removed from clothing they redistribute themselves in the wash, appearing in all sorts of undesirable places.

Beggar Tick Daisies are native to southern Florida and other areas around the Gulf of Mexico. They were accidentally introduced into tropical areas worldwide, possibly riding on the clothes of early European seafarers. It may seem that this plant can prosper anywhere, but that is not the case. In our area it is seldom found in natural areas such as pine flatwoods or Florida scrub, and never in natural wet areas.

In spite of their scruffy appearance and annoying seeds, Beggar Tick Daisies are important for native pollinator insects. They bloom through much of the year, including during droughts, and are one of the few native flowers in many disturbed areas. “Beggar Tick Daisies are kind of the Dollar Stores of the pollination world,” says Deyrup. “They are everywhere and very useful, but you won’t hear the local Chamber of Commerce boasting about them.”

Apparently, the Archbold Biological Station is the only place where scientists have studied the range of insects visiting Beggar Tick Daisies for nectar or pollen. Patient observation revealed 37 species of bees and 18 species of butterflies visiting the flowers. Many species of flies and wasps also visit the flowers. “Most of these wasps and flies are predatory, attacking other kinds of insects,” explains Deyrup, “Nectar from this flower fuels the adult activities of a whole set of useful insects. At the Archbold Biological Station an amazing 81 species of insects are found on flowers of Beggar Tick Daisy. Not bad, for a plant usually considered an obnoxious weed.”

A weed has been defined as a plant growing in the wrong place. People who design gardens for native pollinators should consider keeping a neglected corner for Beggar Tick Daisy to grow in the right place.

**Photo 1: The Beggar Tick Daisy can grow in the most challenging places. Here one is blooming in a crack in pavement. Photo by Mark Deyrup.**



**Photo 2: A sock with Beggar Tick Daisy seeds. The wearer brushed by three small plants. Photo by Mark Deyrup.**



**Photo 3: Native bee on flower of Beggar Tick Daisy. Photo by Tim Lethbridge.**

