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### **An Attractive Invader**

In the last ten years a new plant has come to Highlands County, thriving in the exhaust-laden medians of US 27, the scarred edges of rural byway, and in many yards. Its masses of delicate pinkish violet flowers seem to laugh at drought and soil pollution, offering nectar to bees and butterflies making their dangerous way along roadsides. This attractive invader, known to local botanists as *Richardia grandiflora*, goes by the English name of Large-Flower Mexican Clover, although it is not a clover, and it originates from Brazil, not Mexico.

Anybody admiring the floral display provided by this plant could be forgiven for assuming that it was deliberately brought to Highlands County for roadside beautification. The Large-Flower Mexican Clover, however required no introduction to our county; it introduced itself. "This species of *Richardia* is amazing!" enthuses Dr. Mark Deyrup, entomologist at Archbold Biological Station. "I would have paid good money at a large garden center to get a ground cover that withstands mowing, requires no water or fertilizer, and is dense with ornamental flowers that feed butterflies and bees. Last year I actually dug up a roadside plant and transplanted it into our lawn. Once was all it took."

Invasive plants, even ornamental ones such as the Large-Flower Mexican Clover, usually have a dark side, pushing out or growing over our native plant species. So far, there is no indication of this in Highlands County. This plant is generally restricted to heavily disturbed areas where it is competing with other invasive plants rather than native plants. It does not seem to readily move into most natural habitats. "In many places I see it carpeting the roadside without moving into adjacent sandy scrub," says Dr. Deyrup. "Perhaps it is unable to grow well in our dry, acid, and almost nutrient-free soil. It might be better able to move into natural habitats in lower areas where there is more shell and lime in the soil. I know of no scientific

experiments on improving the growth of the Large-Flower Mexican Clover, and most people would consider such experiments completely unnecessary. More people are worried about this plant taking over their perfect grass lawns, although casual observations suggest that the scruffier the lawn the more likely it is to be invaded by the Large-Flower Mexican Clover.”

When an invasive plant first moves into an area it often goes through explosive population growth. This seems to be happening right now with Large-Flower Mexican Clover. After a few years the dominance of an invasive species sometimes decreases as natural enemies begin to selectively attack this new food plant. This might not happen with this species, as there are other local species of non-native *Richardias* that have been around a long time. During this time no natural enemies have been able to suppress these other species, so Large-Flower Mexican Clover populations may not be likely to collapse. Large-Flower Mexican Clover, like Brazilian Pepper and Asian Smutgrass may be here to stay.

“The common name Large-Flower Mexican Clover is most unsatisfactory,” complains Deyrup. “This plant is neither clover nor Mexican. Suggested names that appear on the Internet are not much better. The name ‘Florida Snow’ is convincing only to those who have never seen snow, and ‘Fairy Cups’ is completely demeaning to a plant that is so tough and hardy that it can rush into highway medians where fairies would fear to tread. It would be great if there could be a naming contest, with the winning name encouraged to spread across the Internet until it displaced other common English names. My entry might be ‘Roadstars,’ which is descriptive and also faintly echoes the now-extinct roadsters of my youth. ‘Lawn-flower’ would be good in an if-you-can’t-beat-em-join-em kind of way. This could be a challenge to readers of Highlands Today: go look at the plant, think of a great new English name, and make it go viral!”

**Photo 1: Enlarged view of flowers of Large-Flower Mexican Clover (*Richardia grandiflora*). Actual flowers are about ½ inch across. Photo by Mark Deyrup.**

