

BWSR Featured Plant

Name: Prairie Spiderwort (*Tradescantia bracteata*)

Plant family: Spiderwort (*Commelinaceae*)



Prairie spiderwort is commonly used in native plantings. It flowers from late May through early July.

Photo Credits: Prairie Moon Nursery

Prairie spiderwort has many common names, including cow slobber, day flower, trinity flower and widow’s tears. *Tradescantia* derives from John Tradescant, gardener for King Charles I of England. The “spider” in “spiderwort” may come from the angular leaves’ resemblance to spider legs. It also could refer to the secretion released by cut stems, which becomes threadlike and silky when it hardens. “Wort” is a variation of an Old English word meaning “root” or “plant.”

Plant Stats

STATEWIDE WETLAND INDICATOR STATUS: FACU

PRIMARY USES: Pollinators’ food source, backyard gardens, treating insect bites

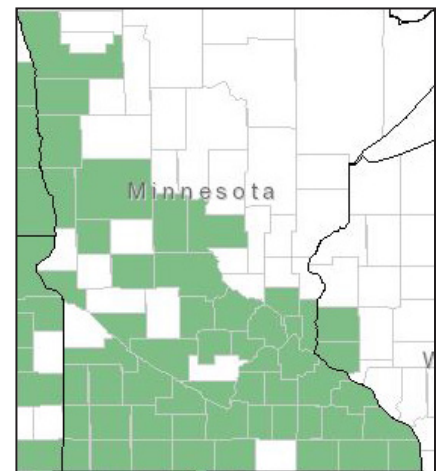
Identification

This compact, clump-forming native perennial grows up to 1.5 feet tall. From late May through early July, flower clusters emerge, usually from the top of the plant. Plants produce one to several blue-to-violet flowers up to 1.5 inches in diameter. Stamens match petals’ color, with plumelike, yellow-tipped hairs. The hair-covered sepals are shorter than the petals. Prairie spiderwort’s two

leaflike bracts usually are longer, wider and flatter than its leaves. Dense hairs grow along the edges and base of the bracts. Flower stalks grow up to 1 inch long — erect while blooming, and then curving down after the flower has gone to seed. Stiff, linear leaves grow 4 to 10 inches long and up to 0.75-inch wide, with a fold along the mid-vein that wraps around the stem. Stems and leaves may be hairy or smooth.

Range

Prairie spiderwort can be found in the southwestern tallgrass prairie region. Native to the central United States, it grows in prairies, meadows, fields, roadsides and railroad rights-of-way.



Range map source: USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Plants Database

Planting Recommendations

While it prefers moist, acidic soils, prairie spiderwort tolerates dry to medium moisture, well-drained sites, full sun and poor soils. It can be planted in native gardens or naturalized

areas. Plants can spread by self-seeding or by underground rhizomes. Clumps can be divided. Cutting foliage close to the ground after blooming encourages new growth.

Similar Species

Prairie spiderwort is the most widespread of Minnesota's three naturally occurring species. Ohio spiderwort (*Tradescantia ohioensis*), common in southeastern Minnesota, prefers

moist soils. The tallest of the three, it's hairless, with flatter, floppier leaves. Western spiderwort (*Tradescantia occidentalis*) has folded leaves, and stiffer leaves and bracts.

A native perennial, prairie spiderwort grows up to 1.5 tall. It's the most widespread of the three spiderwort species that occur naturally in Minnesota.



Uses

Native Americans used spiderwort to treat insect bites and stings; as a tea used to treat cramping, stomach and kidney ailments; and as a blue clothing paint. A long-blooming perennial, it's an excellent food source for pollinators. Its unique foliage and flowers make it an interesting addition to native gardens and rain gardens.

References

Minnesota Wildflowers: <https://www.minnesotawildflowers.info>

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Plants Database: <https://plants.usda.gov/core/profile?symbol=trbr>

Missouri Botanical Garden: <http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org>

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