

Nature Notes

...from Sharon

Coastal Groundcherry (*Physalis angustifolia* Nutt.)

Coastal Groundcherry is one plant you will have to look closely to find, as it is very inconspicuous. It is a Florida native found along the Gulf Coast. It may also be found along coastal areas of Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi. Some refer to it as Sand Cherry. There are 29 species of *Physalis* in the United States and 8 native species in Florida. Different species will have specific leaf shapes, flowers may cluster or be single, and even where it grows is a factor. The species known as *Physalis angustifolia* Nutt. (Coastal Groundcherry) loves the sunny, sandy soils of the coastal dunes in the Preserve. Because it is a rhizomatous plant that sends out underground stems or runners, it is a great dune stabilizer. It can tolerate salty air and drought. This little plant is in the potato family. If it were in your garden at home, you may think it a weed. I've seen these in at least two locations in Barefoot Beach Preserve: on the north side of the southern boardwalk from parking area #1 and at the start of the estuary (east) trail in a gravel area to the left, south of parking area #3.



This species has linear leaves that are up to ten times as long as wide. The leaves are a bright green on the top, with a slightly paler green on the underside. Plants found in the Preserve usually have leaves from 3" to 6" and the overall plant is usually not over a foot tall locally. New leaves are tender and get leathery with age. During the summer, it has small, bell-like single yellow flowers that droop.



The flower is followed by a small, edible fleshy fruit enclosed in its own 'paper bag' (the calyx) to protect it from pests and the elements. The calyx (paper bag) looks similar to a Japanese lantern. The flower/fruit are only about an inch in length/diameter. The calyx is toxic and should not be eaten. The fleshy fruit inside looks like a small tomato and has the taste of a strawberry. It can be used in salads or to make preserves. As small as this fruit is, it would take a lot to make a salad or preserves! During research, I did not find any known medicinal remedies.



Its habitat seems restricted to dunes and small sites of disturbed soil, often on the loose materials pushed out from burrows of the gopher tortoise. It has been suggested (Erdman West, pers. comm., 1962) that the tortoise would encounter, and surely feed upon, the fruits of this plant, then deposit its seeds on suitable loose soil surrounding the burrow. The historic range of the gopher tortoise closely corresponds to the known range of the *Physalis*, permitting a long co-adaptation of these two species. It seems like this theory is proven by the photo to the right (taken at Clam Pass) of a very young gopher tortoise munching on Groundcherry leaves.

