

Nature Notes

...from Sharon

This perennial sub-shrub is in the Aster family and native to Florida. It only stands about 12-18 inches tall on average. *Ambrosia* means food of the gods and *Hispida* means with bristly hairs. If you look closely, you can see the fine hairs on this plant. This plant is not known as a food source for humans. This plant thrives in full sun and tolerates moderate salt wind. It likes the sandy, well-drained soils of the foredune area and into the sunny areas of the coastal strand of Barefoot Beach Preserve. This plant is a good sand binder and its rhizomatous roots are highly beneficial in stabilizing areas where they grow.

The leaves are alternate, pinnate (feather-like), and light green with fine silvery hairs. It produces separate male



and female flower heads on the same plant. The numerous tiny male, yellowish-green disc flowers are about 3 mm in diameter. They grow in a terminal spike, subtended by joined bracts. The female, whitish-green flowers are 1-flowered and are inconspicuously situated below the male ones, in the leaf axils. When viewing from above, you almost can't see the flowers and need to get down low and look at the spike from the underside to really see the blossoms. After pollination, the female flowers develop into a prickly burr with 9-18 straight spines. It contains one arrowhead-shaped seed, brown when mature, and smaller than a grain of wheat. This burr gets dispersed by clinging to the fur or feathers of animals passing by. The seeds are an important winter food for many bird species and it is a host plant for butterflies. You may find this plant throughout the foredune and coastal strand of the Preserve. If you wish to look at the flowers up close, go to parking area #2 and you will see some Beach Ambrosia now blooming there—look just behind the bike rack.

Beach Ambrosia or Coastal Ragweed (*Ambrosia hispida*)



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This is another plant that is good for the home landscape as a ground cover, with its silvery green leaves to add unusual pale accents to a garden. Once established, it does not require watering. Use this plant to create texture and offset other darker greens in your garden or on your patio or balcony in a container.

In the West Indies, it is made into soap and used to relieve itching skin; has been recommended for indigestion; and used to cure the common cold in the form of a strong tea with lime and salt. During the Civil War, 35 year old Francis Payre Porcher, MD was dispatched by the Confederate Surgeon General to wander the southern landscapes and codify all of the native plants that could be used as medicines in order to augment supplies that may have been blockaded. *Ambrosia hispida* shows up in the Southern Fields and Forests, Medical Botany of the Confederate States, published in 1863. It was used for fevers and as a substitute for quinine. It is now used in medical and pharmaceutical research.