

# Nature Notes

...from Sharon

Originating in Madagascar and widely introduced into warm parts of the world by the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century, this species has been naturalized in tropical and subtropical areas worldwide. Cultivated for hundreds of years it can be found growing wild in most warm regions of the world, including the Southern U.S. You may find these throughout the grounds at Barefoot Beach Preserve. The generic name is from the Greek *Katharos*, meaning “pure,” and *anthos*, meaning “flower.” The species name is from the Latin word meaning “rosy” or “pale pink,” in reference to the most common color of the flowers. This plant has also been known as *Vinca rosea* and *Lochnera rosea*.

## Periwinkle or Sailor’s Button

(*catharanthus roseus*)



The blooms of wild plants may be a pale pink with a purple "eye" in their centers or they may be white. Horticulturists have developed varieties with colors ranging from white to hot pink to purple. You will see both the pink with purple eye and the all white varieties in the Preserve, where it flowers almost year-round due to our temperate climate. It has an inconspicuous fruit pod that splits open when ripe, spilling out its small, black seeds. It is self-cultivating once started.

This erect bushy herb grows up to two feet tall. Its shiny elliptical, green opposite leaves have a lighter midrib and almost no petiole (leafstalk). It is a perennial, evergreen herb in the dogbane family (*Apocynaceae*). It grows in dry sandy soils and will tolerate slight salt air near the coast. The plant requires full sun and has a long growing period. It is an early colonizer on disturbed sites and along roadsides. This is another plant that is good to use in the home landscape, as it thrives on very little water.



The Periwinkle had a reputation as a magic plant; Europeans thought it could ward off evil spirits, and the French referred to it as "violet of the sorcerers." It got the name “Sailor’s Button” because sailors thought it had magical properties, it looked like a button—and sailors carried them on ships to have these magical plants near. It is thought that is how it was distributed worldwide so long ago.

The Periwinkle plant has historically been used throughout the Caribbean to treat a wide assortment of diseases. In Europe, it was used as a folk remedy for diabetes for centuries. In India, juice from the leaves was used to treat wasp stings and other insect bites. During the 1950’s Western researchers finally noticed the Periwinkle when they learned of a tea Jamaicans were drinking to treat diabetes. They discovered the plant contains at least 70 useful alkaloids—this plant is now considered the “mother load” by many scientists! Perhaps it is a magical plant! Scientists have confirmed that some of the alkaloids are useful in lowering blood sugar, others lower blood pressure, others act as hemostatics (arrests bleeding), and at least two of the alkaloids have anti-cancer properties. These plants also contain alkaloids which are powerful tranquilizers. Because many of the alkaloids in this plant can have serious side effects, it is not recommended that people attempt to medicate themselves with Periwinkles. Caution: May cause serious side effects, poisoning, and possibly death if used inappropriately.