

Nature Notes

...from Sharon

The Railroad Vine is a beautiful evergreen plant. It is currently in full bloom along the Preserve's dune fronts right now. Although it can bloom throughout the year, it is now at its peak blooming season. This vine is found on beaches and dunes throughout Florida.

The Railroad Vine or Goats Foot sometimes has been called the beach morning glory. However, the name, "beach morning glory" usually refers to a species with white flowers that also grows on some beaches (*Ipomea imperati*). There are over 500 species of morning glories.



This plant is a great dune stabilizer and is one of the primary dune colonizers or pioneering species. Its common name of railroad vine can be attributed to its ability to send out "tracks" of stolons up to 100 feet long. Stolons are similar to stems except they produce roots at the nodes and run horizontally (like railroad tracks) rather than vertically.

The roots at the nodes can be over 10 feet long and the taproots can go up to 3 feet deep. This low vine usually gets no more than 16 inches high. It has been known to form a dense groundcover on dunes. This vine can thrive in nutrient-poor, sandy soils and has a high tolerance of saltwater spray and drought. It helps stabilize the dunes by rooting at nodes all along its length. Amazing how it knows to only grow down to the high tide line! The leaf is simple, alternately arranged, dark green and leathery. They are glabrous (smooth, hairless) and can grow up to 6 inches in length. The leaves are two lobed and have a clef apex, making them resemble a goat's footprint. Sometimes, you may notice that the leaf folds nearly in half, almost closing to lessen evaporation.

The beautiful funnel-shaped flowers are a pinkish-lavender, with a deeper lavender star forming at the center of the corolla. The flower has five sympetalous (united or fused together) petals. The flowers open only once and are usually open from the late evening until mid-morning. They appear their best in early morning. By mid-afternoon most flowers will have folded and faded. Although the flowers have little to no fragrance, the large nectarines in the showy flowers attract insects to assist in cross pollination. Primary pollinators include bees, butterflies, and even ants.



After flowering, a small round fruit appears and splits open when it matures, to reveal four velvety, dark brown seeds. The seeds are unaffected by saltwater and may drift to be washed up on another beach. The seeds must be abraded (scratched) by sand or otherwise scarified before they will germinate—just what the surf ordered. Propagation is by seeds or cuttings.

The leaves and stems exude a white sap that may be a chemical protection against insect pests and grazing animals. It is said the Carib Indians used railroad vine in ritual baths to alleviate evil spells. The juice from the leaves has been used to treat jellyfish stings.

Head for the beach and look for these beautiful plants on the dunes!

Railroad Vine or Goats Foot (*Ipomoea pes-caprae*)

