

Tradescantia virginiana

[Synonyms : *Ephemerum congestum*, *Tradescantia x andersoniana*, *Tradescantia brevicaulis*, *Tradescantia congesta*, *Tradescantia occidentalis*, *Tradescantia rupestris*, *Tradescantia speciosa*, *Tradescantia virginiana* var. *alba*, *Tradescantia virginiana* var. *barbata*, *Tradescantia virginica*]

SPIDERWORT is a perennial. Native to southern North America it has purplish-violet or rose (occasionally white) flowers with hairy, yellow stamens.

It is also known as Blue bells, Common spiderwort, Devil in the pulpit, Flower of a day, Job's tears, Moses in the bulrushes, One day flower, *Podeňka virginská* (Czech), Prairie spiderwort, Snake grass, Spider flower, Spider lily, *Tradeskancia virgínska* (Slovak), *Tremastarblomma* (Swedish), Trinity, Trinity flower, Trinity lily, Virginia spiderwort, and Widow's tears; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of 'esteem but not love'.

The flowers, which are pollinated by bees, open for part of a day then die and turn runny. *Virginiana* means 'of or from Virginia (United States)' which itself was named after the English 'Virgin Queen' Elizabeth I (1533-1603).

Unusually the flower does not dry up when it dies. Instead it disintegrates into inky wet blobs and this led to the common names Job's tears and Widow's tears.

The flower's beauty is said to have been especially appreciated by the Dakota North American Indians that they even composed a song to it.

The Cherokee tribe ate the young leaves and stems mixed with other cooked vegetables. They also valued the plant for medicinal qualities. It offered them a laxative and a treatment for kidney disorders, stomach-ache, cancer, some female ailments and insect bites.

John Tradescant the Elder (1570-c.1638) is said to have received the plant in error from a friend when it was sent to England from Virginia in southern North America. Initially botanists classed it in a different family of plants to this one because it was said to be a remedy for bites from the harmless phalangium spider.

In the kitchen the flowers can be used as salad decoration, and the steamed young stems and leaves can be eaten as a vegetable.

Today it would seem that interest in spiderwort is primarily directed towards its ability to be able to detect various environmentally noxious emissions such as car exhaust fumes, formaldehydes from badly ventilated buildings, pesticides, radiation and sulphur dioxides. The plant could perhaps be called an 'environmental barometer'. Apparently under a microscope such emissions are signified by a change from blue to pink in cells in the stamens from 8 to 18 days following their exposure.