

## Cute Little Plants That Take-over Your Yard-Mexican petunia



These brown longitudinal capsules contain seeds of Mexican petunia.



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Mexican petunia, *Ruellia tweediana*, is one of those few, brilliant blue flowering herbaceous shrubs that is abundantly used. It is not a true petunia, as petunias are in the Solanaceae family and *Ruellia* is in the Acanthaceae family. Unfortunately, it is on the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council list as a category 1, which is defined as, “ Invasive exotics that are altering native plant communities by displacing native species, changing community structures or ecological functions or hybridizing with natives.” See: <http://www.fleppc.org/> . However, it is not on the Florida Department of Environmental Protection prohibited plants list nor is it on the FDACS nor the USDA noxious weed list.

I’m not sure if it belongs on the FEPPC list. I haven’t seen my healthy stand set seed. Nor have I been able to find obvious flushes of sprouting seedlings. When mature, the seed pod splits open and shoots the seeds some distance away from the plant.

The three little plants I set out were fine for about two years and then the stems grew to about four feet and started flopping over and starting new plants at the nodes and created quite a tangled jungle that spread out of bounds about five times more than my “plan” had called for. To keep them in bounds, they need to be whacked back two times a year, which they seemed to thrive on. The pruning creates a pile of yard waste, which most people don’t compost and the yard workers haul it off to the landfill, which doesn’t need any more debris. I started using Roundup herbicide and I think they like that too. This will comedown to, as with many of the other cute little plants, a hands and knees grubbing operation to remove the tangle in my backyard border.

According to Dr. Rick Schoellhorn (floriculture researcher previously with the University of Florida and now at Proven Winners, LLC.) Mexican petunia, *Ruellia tweediana* (*R. brittoniana*) is actually a whole group of nearly identical species/forms.

A study conducted by University of Florida researchers at Fort Pierce (<http://irrecenvhort.ifas.ufl.edu>) on different cultivars, found that the 'Katie' dwarf series produced fewer seed than the prolific wildtype. In their study, 'Purple Showers' did not produce seeds, but it is more aggressive as a vegetative sprawler than the wild type species. It is recommended that only the 'Purple Showers' sterile variety be used. Use the photo below to help identify plants when shopping as it is easy to mix the tags and send out mislabeled plants. The wider leaves and larger flowers on 'Purple Showers' will help distinguish it from similar types. Also, check for seed pod development and rip the plants out if they produce seed. Otherwise you may be on your hands and knees ripping out a vigorous overgrown thicket of Mexican petunia in a few years! Buyer beware!



Mexican petunia flowers and leaves vary by cultivar, left to right: 'Purple Showers' (the only sterile cultivar); Wild type; and 'Morado Chi'. Photo, Sandra Wilson, IFAS, IRREC.

For more information on home gardening, contact the University of Florida, Collier County Cooperative Extension Service, Master Gardener Plant Clinic, at 353-2872. If you have a specimen that you want identified, the Extension Plant Clinic at 14700 Immokalee Rd. is open Monday, Wednesday and Friday, 9 a.m. to noon and 1 p.m. to 4 p.m., call 353-2872. Extension programs are open to all persons without regard to race, color, creed, sex, handicap or national origin. For updates on southwest Florida Horticulture and more landscape information visit: <http://collier.ifas.ufl.edu>