

Helianthus debilis Beach Sunflower¹

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Introduction

The beach sunflower is a spreading perennial that has attractive, small, sunflower-like flower heads, which are borne throughout the year. These showy flowers have 10 to 20 pale yellow rays that encircle a purplish-brown disk that is 0.5 to 1 inch wide. Different species of butterflies are attracted to these charming flowers. The 3-inch-wide flowers of this plant are followed by small seeds that readily germinate to produce plantlets. The beach sunflower has small, dark green, deltoid leaves that are irregularly lobed and toothed. These glossy leaves are roughly pubescent and attain a length of 4 inches.

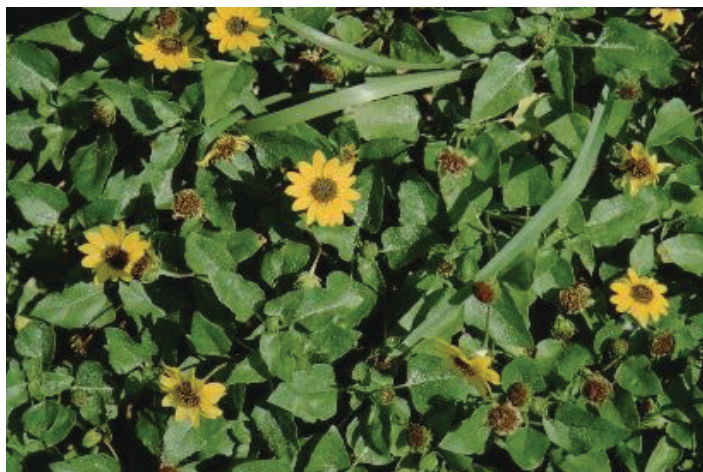


Figure 1. Flower—*Helianthus debilis*: Beach sunflower.

Credits: Edward F. Gilman, UF/IFAS

General Information

Scientific name: *Helianthus debilis*

Pronunciation: heel-ee-ANTH-us DEB-bil-liss

Common name(s): beach sunflower, cucumberleaf sunflower, east coast dune sunflower

Family: *Asteraceae*

Plant type: herbaceous; perennial; ground cover

USDA hardiness zones: 8B through 10 (Figure 2)



Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

Planting month for zone 8: May; Jun; Jul

Planting month for zone 9: Apr; May; Jun; Jul; Aug

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Planting month for zone 10 and 11: Feb; Mar; Apr; May; Jun; Jul; Aug; Sep; Oct; Nov; Dec

Origin: native to Florida

Invasive potential: not known to be invasive

Uses: ground cover; attracts butterflies; border; mass planting; cascading down a wall; edging

Availability: somewhat available, may have to go out of the region to find the plant

Description

Height: 2 to 4 feet

Spread: 2 to 4 feet

Plant habit: spreading

Plant density: dense

Growth rate: fast

Texture: medium

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate

Leaf type: simple

Leaf margin: dentate

Leaf shape: deltoid

Leaf venation: pinnate

Leaf type and persistence: semi-evergreen

Leaf blade length: 2 to 4 inches

Leaf color: green

Fall color: not applicable

Fall characteristic: not applicable

Flower

Flower color: yellow

Flower characteristic: year-round flowering

Fruit

Fruit shape: unknown

Fruit length: unknown

Fruit cover: dry or hard

Fruit color: unknown

Fruit characteristic: attracts birds; inconspicuous and not showy

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: typically, multi-trunked or clumping stems

Current year stem/twig color: green

Current year stem/twig thickness: medium

Culture

Light requirement: plant grows in full sun

Soil tolerances: acidic; alkaline; sand; loam

Drought tolerance: high

Soil salt tolerances: good

Plant spacing: 18 to 24 inches

Other

Roots: not applicable

Winter interest: plant has winter interest due to unusual form, nice persistent fruits, showy winter trunk, or winter flowers

Outstanding plant: not particularly outstanding

Pest resistance: no serious pests are normally seen on the plant

Use and Management

Beach sunflower is often used as a flowering ground cover along and near the beach and reaches a height of about 18 inches. This plant spreads by underground runners and will quickly fill in an area if provided with occasional irrigation along the beach front. Over irrigation in other locations can slow growth and cause plant decline. One or

two applications of fertilizer during the year will encourage plants to establish and cover the ground quickly. It looks great when massed as a ground cover. The cut flowers are charming in arrangements indoors.

The beach sunflower grows best on well-drained sandy soils. This plant will not tolerate over-watering or over fertilizing and is very drought tolerant. It needs to be placed in an area that receives full sun and will endure high levels of salt spray. Beach sunflower is an annual in those areas that have freezing temperatures in the winter; however, it will reseed itself or act as a perennial in central Florida.

Varieties and cultivars: var. *cupreatus*, copper-red rays; var. *purpureus*, pink or violet rays; var. *roseus*, rose colored rays; 'Dazzler', chestnut and orange head; 'Excelsior', yellow, red, brown, and purple head; 'Orion', deep yellow head.

Use seeds to propagate this lovely plant.

Pests and Diseases

No pests or diseases are of major concern.