

Horseherb, All Star Plant?

Distribute 01-12-2017

Horseherb (*Calyptecarpus vialis*) is not as showy as most of the blooming plants we describe in the “What’s Blooming Now” feature but despite its plain appearance horseherb deserves recognition for the important role it plays in many landscapes. My colleague on Milberger’s Gardening South Texas, Dr. Jerry Parsons went so far a few years ago to explore horseherb as a commercial groundcover. He collected the tiny seed and had test beds planted all over the area. Horseherb transplants do appear occasionally on the retail nursery market but is probably not destined for a major commercial role because despite its valuable characteristics, they are only provided on the plants own terms. Horseherb is hard to manage, it selects you and your yard, rather than being selected by the gardener.

Also called straggler daisy, horse herb is a low growing plant with dime-size heart-shaped leaves with tiny yellow flowers. Right now it is common in thin lawns on shallow soils in sun or shade. It grows so thick in its favorite habitats that the lawn can look like it has been overseeded. In fact, one of its all-star worthy values is that it makes an excellent groundcover. Combined with rescue grass and/ or annual bluegrass it is a sustainable winter turf for lawns that are thin due to shallow soil or shade. Mow the sustainable winter lawn every two weeks and it can look better than the regular summer lawn on such soils.

Horseherb is a reseeding perennial. I came reluctantly into the horseherb appreciator camp after years of unsuccessfully trying to control it with pre-emergent and contact herbicides. The plant seems indestructible, but again, on its own terms. Horseherb is sensitive to dry weather. Don’t get me wrong, it survives dry weather but it disappears during dry weather. Just when you are inclined to do without St Augustine or Bermuda grass in favor of horseherb, we have 4 weeks of drought and the ground is bare where it used to be lush with horseherb! When the rains start it will come back but until then the soil is bare.

There are also several other desirable horseherb characteristics to consider. The plant is a favorite browse for deer and it provides nectar to butterflies.

Wildlife biologists tell us over and over that deer are browsers, not grazers. A very small portion of their food is supplied by grass. They require the foliage and stems of broadleaf plants for nutrition. That pronouncement is questioned quite often in neighborhoods like mine where deer move across lawns feeding like cattle. Look close, however and the lawn component they are eating is the broadleaf weed, horseherb. As long as the soil is moist, the horseherb can provide enough browse to keep the deer healthy and happy.

Last year was a spectacular year for butterflies. Rainfall was generous and well-spaced so there was nectar producing blooms all year. One of those nectar sources was horseherb. If you lived in a neighborhood with horseherb, visits to the lawn area by butterflies, especially black swallowtails, was very noticeable. Next to the browsing groups of deer were numerous black swallowtails and other butterflies.

For more information on the horseherb centered sustainable winter lawn or Dr. Parsons work with horseherb, visit plantanswers.com.