
Wildflower Spot – August 2015

John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

DUNE SANDSPUR

Cenchrus tribuloides

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This native beach grass is often found when walking the dunes or the beach in the fall. As with most grasses, the flowers are inconspicuous and the plant is recognized by its fruits and seeds. The flowering spikes of Dune Sandspur carry several hairy, cup-shaped burs, covered with bristles. Each one has a backward-pointing barb that is very painful to the skin, and difficult to remove. As one of nature's hitchhikers, these spiny fruits easily attach to shoes, pants, and skin, where they will be carried to new locations.

Of the 3 species of the genus *Cenchrus* in the Coastal Plain, this is most likely the species discovered in sand dunes and along the beach, especially when walking barefoot. Other species of *Cenchrus* are recognized by differences in the character of the spines and leaf blades.

Dune Sandspur is an annual with lots of branches that trail along the sand. The leaves are leathery and rough to the touch, and fold inward so they appear to be round. By late fall the

plant begins to root wherever the stem touches the ground. This native plant requires sandy soil and full sun, and is common in Virginia's Coastal Plain, growing in coastal sands, sandy fields and woods. The range is from southern New York to Florida and Texas.

Despite its formidable seeds, Sandspur does have redeeming qualities as a sand binder. The stems produce roots while lying flat, thereby securing the plant; the low profile and rooted stems are adaptive features that reduce wind abrasion and increase water uptake.

The species name *tribuloides* comes from the Latin "*tribulus*" referring to a weapon called a caltrop that had four spikes, one always pointing upward when supported on the ground by the other three. ❖



Photo: Dune Sandspur (*Cenchrus tribuloides*) taken by Helen Hamilton
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