

COMMELINA CYANEA

By Jennifer Liney



Another Australian plant, that has its place in the bush, but definitely not welcome in fertilised garden beds, is *Commelina cyanea*. A prostrate tuberous herb that produces roots at each leaf node on a stem where it touches the soil, it can spread rapidly over a garden bed, smothering everything that stands in its way. So if a blanket groundcover is what is needed, then many Australian plant species dislike enriched soil, preferring low nutrient skeletal soils, but this one revels in good

living.

(Photo by Jackie Miles, copied with permission from her website <http://thebegavalley.org.au/plants.html>)

Commelina cyanea is a member of the same family as the dreaded Wandering Jew; i.e. Commelinaceae, and it is nearly as hard to eliminate from a garden bed. There are other *Commelina* species from tropical Asia and parts of the Northern Hemisphere; two of these imports have naturalised on the Central and North Coasts. *C. cyanea* is one of two New South Wales species. The other is *C. ensifolia* from the NSW North West Slopes and Plains.

The Type specimen was described as having been collected in 'Australia'. The original description was published by Robert Brown in 1810. The name *Commelina* is after Johan and Caspar Commelin, 17th century Dutch botanists; *cyanea* means deep blue, referring to the colour of the flower, a flower that appears to have three petals, but they are really tepals, a name used when the sepals and petals of a flower are combined in the one structure.

Unusually, the plant has had only one genus name throughout its botanical life, although there have been a couple of misapplications. In 1873, Frederick von Mueller called it *C. communis*, and as recently as 2007 Neville Walsh, from South Australia, suggested the specific name of *diffusa*. Neither of these species names was accepted.

The leaves of this plant were eaten either cooked or raw to stave off scurvy in early settler days, hence the common name Scurvy Weed. Today, some say that it does not taste too bad – rather like bitter lettuce. All parts are rich in vitamin C, niacin, and riboflavins. The other common name, Creeping Christian, refers to its similarity to the original Wandering Jew, *Tradescantia albiflora*, but the leaves of the Scurvy Weed are spaced further apart, not quite so fleshy and a slightly different shape. Scurvy Weed has fleshy tuberous roots at the nodes, while the roots of Wandering Jew are fibrous, but both species break off easily at each node when pulled up by hand, leaving the roots in the ground to grow another stem.



Commelina Leaves



Wandering Jew leaves

(Photos by Jennifer Liney)

It turns out that *T. albiflora* has recently suffered a name change to *T. fluminensis*. So that is another one for the memory bank.

Cyanea commelina is most common in new gardens wrought from bushland. It seldom appears in older, more civilised gardens.