

PINKS, PINKED AND PINK!

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Fringed Campion is a beautiful wildflower which has been given endangered status on the Federal List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants (3). *Silene polypetala* (Walter) Fernald & Schubert is included by Clewell (1) in his manual of Panhandle flora and by Small [as *S. baldwinii* Nuttall] in his manual of southeastern flora (7). *Silene polypetala* is also on the Endangered Plant List of the Regulated Plant Index Rule 5B-40 (4) of the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS), formerly Florida Statutes Chapter 581.185-87 (5). The Division of Plant Industry is charged therein to regulate and preserve the endangered, threatened, and/or commercially exploited plant species named in the Regulated Plant Index.



Fig. 1. Habitat of *Silene polypetala*. (Photo courtesy of Samuel B. Jones, Jr.)

As a member of the Caryophyllaceae, *Silene polypetala* shares several features with other members of the Pink or Carnation Family. These include opposite leaves connected at the base by a thin tissue, swollen nodes, and numerous seeds attached around a central shaft (axis) of the fruit. The genus *Silene* comprises about 500 species, all of which occur in the Northern Hemisphere. In Florida, you may see the two escaped European species, *S. gallica* L., and *S. antirrhina* L. *Silene antirrhina* is commonly called Sleepy Catchfly because of the sticky tissue below the flowers which entangles tiny insects. Elsewhere in the South is found the common *Silene virginica* L. whose showy, notched, crimson flowers elicit its common name of Fire Pink.

Petals of most Pinks are "pinked," meaning they are cleft or split at the tips as though pinking shears had notched them. In order to see this characteristic, I suggest that you examine with a hand lens the tiny white flowers of Chickweed (*Stellaria media* (L.) Villars), a common member of the Caryophyllaceae which grows as a weed in many lawns; or, if you have access to Sweet William (*Dianthus barbatus* L.) or Fire Pink, substitute those flowers. Notice that each of the five petals of Chickweed (and the others) is cleft almost to the base. Fringed Campion takes "pinked" a step further by also having fimbriate (lacy) petals. This fimbriate trait gives the species its common name, Fringed Campion. Unfortunately, "Campion" is usually a common name for species of *Lychnis*, another genus in the Pink Family. Possibly a better common name for *Silene polypetala* is Fringed Pink. Because this species is not common, a common name apparently did not appear in print until Duncan and Foote (2) used Fringed Campion as a common name in their popular wildflower book.

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DISTRIBUTION: There are two geographic distributions for *Silene polypetalata*: the northern populations are found on Piedmont soils of four counties along the fall line near the Coastal Plain in Georgia; the southern populations are located in Decatur County, Georgia along the Flint and Apalachicola Rivers and in Florida's Gadsden and Jackson Counties on both the east and west sides of the Apalachicola River (3). The plants occur on well-drained soils in hardwood forests, often in steep ravines. In Florida, the Fringed Campion can occur in the same ravines as *Torreya taxifolia* Arnott, the endangered Florida Torreya. This habitat is characterized by a canopy of Southern Magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora* L.), Yellow Poplar (*Liriodendron tulipifera* L.), Maple (*Acer rubrum* L.), Beech (*Fagus grandifolia* L.), Spruce Pine (*Pinus glabra* Walter), and Sugarberry (*Celtis laevigata* Willd.) (3).

You may wish to look for additional localities for this rare species to add to the information which is on file with the Florida Natural Areas Inventory. Isolated populations may have been overlooked.

Dr. Robert Kral (6) emphasizes that *Silene polypetalata* is a species which is dependent on the conditions provided by a deciduous overstory. Only under mixed, deciduous, old forest can the Fringed Campion thrive. Kral suggests that this species is one of those plants which is light-dependent during its period of flowering and shade-dependent during periods of fruiting and dormancy. The blooming period from late March through April underscores the deciduous woods connection, since blooms occur before the trees of the deciduous forest have their full complement of leaves.

DESCRIPTION: The plants may reach a height of 40 cm (16 inches) from a basal rosette. Each plant may have several flowering shoots. Leaves are pale green, soft, opposite, with entire margins, and up to 9 cm (4 inches) long. The leaves of the basal rosette and the lower stem are obovate or spatulate with winged petioles, but further up the stem the leaves become smaller, more elliptic and have rounded to clasping bases. The pink or rarely white petalled flowers are arranged in a terminal cyme of 3 to 5 flowers, sometimes with another cyme on a lower node. The calyx is tubular, about 2 cm long, 5-lobed and covered with soft hairs. The narrow base (claw) of each of the petals extends to the top of the calyx tube and then the expanded triangular tip of each petal (about 2.5 to 3 cm long) is displayed. There are 10 short stamens which are not much longer than the petal claws. The pistil is slender with 3-5 styles and a superior ovary. The fruit is a capsule about 7 to 9 mm long.

HORTICULTURAL TIPS: Fringed Campion easily reproduces vegetatively with both offshoots and stolon-like rhizomes producing rosettes which can become new plants. However, the species does not seem to reproduce quite so easily by seed.

I have observed a gorgeous large bed of *Silene polypetalata* in full bloom growing in cultivation, but have been told that *Silene polypetalata* does not stay "thrifty." Rather, the plants tend to disappear unless fallen leaves (or other mulch) are removed in the early spring. Perhaps this persistence problem and the few propagules obtained by seed are why *Silene polypetalata* has become rare. This herbaceous perennial wildflower is certainly one of the most beautiful of the rare plant species. The task of removing litter from the plants in the early springtime should be a simple chore and the flowers are worth the effort.

Pattern after famous Kew Gardens in England and Callaway Gardens in Georgia and grow this wildflower in your personal garden, provided you have a deciduous woods habitat and are in North or Central Florida. Plants obtained by tissue culture and by cuttings are available in the nursery trade. With just a bit of care, planted in well-drained but moist soils with high humus content and situated under deciduous trees, *Silene polypetalata* should become a focal point in the native plant garden.

Now you know why the title: Pinks (members of the Pink Family); pinked (the cleft petals); and pink (for color of the petals).

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