

Wildflower in Focus - False Indigo-bush

Amorpha fruticosa L.

False indigo-bush, Tall indigo-bush, Desert false indigo
Pea Family, Fabaceae



I considered breaking with Wildflower-in-Focus tradition by featuring a non-native invasive legume like kudzu or *Lespedeza cuneata*, but I finally decided to stick with a native—that is, a supposedly “good” plant. Then, I will confess, I selected *Amorpha fruticosa* based solely on Jon Corcoran’s beautiful photo, perfect for the cover.

I knew nothing else about this species of shrub.

My first half hour of research taught me that false indigo-bush is considered an invasive nuisance in, at least, the Pacific northwest, and several northeastern states, Central Europe and Japan. In Washington state, it’s on the State Noxious Weed Control List, having spread along stream corridors throughout the state. The New Jersey Invasive Species Strike Team ranks its threat to open wetlands as “high.” It’s on the Suffolk County, Long Island, “Do Not Plant List.” It’s described as a “very troublesome environmental weed” in riparian habitats of southern and eastern Europe, and it appears to be spreading north and west in Europe. It’s considered one of the 100 worst invasive plants in Japan where it inhabits “vacant lots, roadsides, riversides, beaches, etc.” The list goes on.

How did this happen? False indigo-bush is known to have been planted as an ornamental from colonial times. This means that its precise native range is open to question. It is currently found in the wild in all the contiguous states except Montana and Nevada. Fernald (1950) states that the native range extends into southern Pennsylvania, Ohio and New Jersey. I found references to sightings in the late 1800s in Staten Island and the Hudson Palisades, but it is assumed that those plants had escaped cultivation. What about Maryland? I asked State Botanist, Chris Frye. He responded:

“This is another species where Maryland is near or at the northern range limit. There are multiple collections (mostly suspiciously recent) from Maryland and it appears to be a native shrub of the coastal plain with scattered stations west of the Fall Line—these almost certainly escapes from cultivation or intentionally planted. So, in my opinion it is native to Maryland but with a mix of naturally-occurring and planted/escaped-from-cultivation populations.”

The ornamental value of false indigo-bush is apparently limited. Dirr turns up his nose at it, commenting that “not a great deal of worth [is] attached to this plant; perhaps for poor soil areas where few

plants will survive.” Then why is it so widespread? Once again, a familiar story repeats itself. The combination of ornamental planting, roadside planting by highway departments, and use for hedgerows has dispersed this species well beyond its native range. It requires full sun, but it has a high tolerance for a variety of habitats including infertile and saline soils.



Cabera quadrifasciaria,
a moth for which *A. fruticosa*
is the host plant.

False indigo-bush is the larval host plant for the four-line cabera moth, *Cabera quadrifasciaria*. Interestingly, the moth’s range, as shown by the Moth Photographers Group, includes southern and midwestern states in which false indigo-bush is reliably considered native, but it does not include the states in which the plant is regarded as a non-native invasive. Apparently, those who planted false indigo-bush failed to bring its insect partner along.

~ Kirsten Johnson

References:

Bicknell, E.P. 1889. Notes on the Flora of the Palisades of the Hudson, Bulletin of the Torrey Botanical Club, Vol. 16, No. 2, pp. 51–53.

Dirr, M.A. 1983. Manual of Woody Landscape Plants. Stipes Publishing Company, Champaign, Illinois.

Fernald, M.L. 1950. Gray’s Manual of Botany 8th ed. Dioscorides Press, Portland OR.

L.H.H. 1872. Bulletin of the Torrey Botanical Club, Vol. 3, No. 6, p. 32.

Moth Photographers: <http://mothphotographersgroup.msstate.edu/species.php?hodges=6680>

Invasive in:

NJ: <http://www.njisst.org/files/plantidfactsheets.pdf>

Washington: <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/plants/weeds/aqua014.html>

New England: https://www.eddmaps.org/ipane/ipanespecies/shrubs/Amorpha_fruticosa.htm

Long Island: suffolkcountyny.gov/Portals/0/environmentandenergy/Management%20List_%202011%20pdf.pdf

Europe: alienplantsbelgium.be/content/amorpha-fruticosa

Japan: <http://www.nies.go.jp/biodiversity/invasive/DB/detail/>



Robert Ferraro

False indigo-bush at Beverly Triton Beach Park, Anne Arundel Co.