

# **RHOEO SPATHACEA** (SW.) STEARN

**Commelinaceae/Dayflower Family**

**Common Names:** Oyster plant, boat lily, Moses-in-a-boat  
**Synonymy:** *Tradescantia spathacea* Swartz, *Rhoeo discolor* (L'Hér.) Hance  
**Origin:** West Indies, Mexico, Central America

**Botanical Description:** Perennial herb with short, stout stem nearly hidden by overlapping leaf bases. Forms clumps by offshoots from fleshy rootstock. Leaves spreading-erect, closely overlapping in spiral pattern. Blades broadly linear, sharp-tipped, waxy, stiff, somewhat fleshy, 15-30 cm (6-12 in) long and 2.5-8 cm (1-3 in) wide; upper surfaces dark green or green with pale yellow stripes; lower surfaces usually purple. Flowers small, white, clustered within a folded (boat-shaped) bract (spathe) 3-4 cm long, short-stalked from leaf axils. Three petals, 6 stamens with hairy stalks; fruit a 2-seeded capsule, in clusters within the bract.

**Ecological Significance:** Introduced from tropical America (Morton and Ledin 1952, Small 1933). A favorite garden plant in the tropics, noted in 1933 (Small) as naturalized in peninsular Florida, in cultivated grounds and pinelands. Also noted as naturalized in 1947 (Bailey and Bailey), in 1968 (Ward), and later as a rare escapee from cultivation in southwest Florida (Wunderlin 1982). Noted as spreading irrepressibly in south Florida, volunteering far from planting sites on rock walls and building roofs, and on trees (Morton 1976, 1982). Spreads readily from cultivation by both seed and self-propagation of offshoots (Watkins and Wolfe 1986). Forms dense ground cover and clumps quickly (Hunt 1977). Has escaped into coastal tropical hammocks, where the dense cover prevents seedling growth of native canopy tree species (D. F. Austin, Florida Atlantic University, 1996 personal communication).

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**In Lake Wyman natural area, Palm Beach County**

**Distribution:** Cultivated widely in the tropics and as a houseplant elsewhere (Small 1933). Reported from natural areas of Brevard, Broward, Dade, Lee, Martin, and Palm Beach counties, in scrub, hammocks, and slough edges (EPPC 1996). Naturalized populations documented by herbarium specimens from Broward, Dade, Lee, and Monroe counties (Wunderlin *et al.* 1995).

**Life History:** Roots renewed easily when pulled up or broken (Morton 1982). Sensitive to freezing; can grow in high or medium light (Broschat and Meerow 1991). Flowers all year (Wunderlin 1982), providing year-round availability of small, slender seeds. Cross-pollinated by insects, or self-pollinated (Zomlefer 1983). Dispersed by seed to aerial surfaces such as walls, but vector of transport uncertain, perhaps wind. Recent “dwarf” cultivars apparently sterile or limited in their seed production, spreading primarily by vegetative offshoots where planted (Steve Kent, Tree of Life Nursery, 1998 personal communication). Leaves eaten, or at least nibbled, by raccoons, ducks, and dogs (Morton 1982). Can cause in humans a stinging, itching, and/or rash from contact with plant surfaces or the copious astringent juice (Morton 1982).

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**Stout clumps**

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**Flower, boat-shaped bract**