THESPESIA POPULNEA (L.) SOL. EX CORREA

Malvaceae/Mallow Family

Common Names: Seaside mahoe, portia tree
Synonymy: None
Origin: Old World tropics

Botanical Description: Evergreen shrubby tree, commonly to 13 m (40 ft) tall, with young branches minutely brown-scaly. Leaves alternate, simple, with petioles 5-10 cm (2-4 in) long; blades entire, heart shaped (poplar-like), shiny dark green above, 5-20 cm (2-8 in) long, with usually 5 main veins from base. Flowers showy, hibiscus-like, single at upper leaf axils, to 8 cm (3 in) across; corolla yellow with a red center, turning maroon by nightfall; stamens united into a column shorter than petals. Fruit a leathery, flattened-globose, 5-parted capsule, 4 cm (1.5 in) wide, yellow turning black, persisting unopened for a time and bearing several brown hairy seeds.

NOTE: May be confused with another naturalized exotic, sea hibiscus (*Hibiscus tiliaceus* L.), but its leaves wider, with dense star-shaped hairs on lower surfaces; and with the endangered Florida native, wild cotton (*Gossypium hirsutum* L.), but its leaves opposite. Other mallow family members in Florida rarely reach tree stature (Nelson 1994).

Ecological Significance: Introduced for ornament in or before 1928, when importation by U.S. Department of Agriculture was noted at Miami (Gordon and Thomas 1997). Naturalized in Florida shore hammocks and sand dunes by 1933 (Small 1933), with spreading lower branches making “almost impenetrable thickets” and large fruit crops continuously increasing its dense growth. Noted as commonly naturalized in coastal areas of south Florida and the Keys (Watkins 1970, Nelson 1994). Now a common constituent of mangrove communities and low wave-action beaches (D. F. Austin, Florida Atlantic University, 1995 personal communication). Sometimes forms forests of seedlings at the high-tide line (Nellis 1994). Reported from natural areas, including Everglades National Park, in Monroe, Dade, Collier, Lee, Palm Beach, and Martin counties (EPPC 1996). Also weedy in cultivated landscapes (Broschat and Meerow 1991).

KAL

Immature fruits

Distribution: Originating in India (Nelson 1996), but a common plant of coastal strands across Old World tropics (Willis 1973). Naturalized in Florida and West Indies; also cultivated occasionally in Central and South America and probably naturalized (Little and Wadsworth 1964). Has taken over beaches used by nesting sea turtles on St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands (Austin 1993). In Florida, documented by herbarium specimens from southernmost counties and from Brevard County on the central east coast (Wunderlin *et al.* 1995).

Life History: Cold-sensitive, restricted to areas with minimum temperatures above 1.7˚C (35˚F) (Broschat and Meerow 1991). Resists salt spray and wind action (Rao *et al.* 1983). Grows "luxuriantly on shores of bays and inlets" (Small 1933); able to thrive in low silty land and coral and sand berms (Nellis 1994). Shifts into the more efficient C_4-type of photosynthesis under saline conditions (Kotmire and Bhosale 1985). Flowers and fruits nearly year-round. Fruits and seeds buoyant, adapted to long-distance dispersal by tides and ocean currents (Nellis 1994).

KAL

In Matheson Hammock, Miami-Dade County

KAL

Flower

JD

Leaves