

East Coast Dune Sunflower, *Helianthus debilis* subsp. *debilis*

Introduction

East Coast dune sunflower, also known as beach sunflower, is found in coastal uplands along the east coast of Florida and is an important stabilizer of beach dunes due to its long taproot. It is an underutilized and versatile plant in residential landscapes that is highly drought and salt tolerant. When planted en masse, it provides striking color and is very attractive growing over rock or cascading down walls. The bright-green leaves and cheery, daisy-like flowers are a welcome sight in the garden.

East Coast dune sunflower will thrive in the rocky soils of Monroe County with little to no supplemental fertilizer or water once established. For best growth in home landscapes, select smaller plants and provide a lot of open space for growth. Smaller plants tend to grow faster, and bloom more frequently than plants grown in larger containers.



Helianthus debilis subsp. *debilis*. Credit: M. Leonard-Mularz, UF/IFAS

General Information

Origin: East Coast of Florida

U.S.D.A. Zone: 8-11

Description

Plant type: Spreading, herbaceous, short-lived perennial wildflower.

Typical dimensions in Monroe County: 1 to 2 feet in height, 3 to 4 feet spread, often mounding.

Growth rate: Fast

Stems: Green, becoming woody with age. Prune back to encourage new growth and extend the life of the plant or uproot older plants to promote seed germination.

Leaf characteristics: Green, deltoid in shape, 2 to 4 inches long. Leaves are irregularly toothed, opposite to alternate, with a rough texture.

Flower: Showy, 2 inch-wide, single composite flowers with bright yellow ray florets and brown disc florets in the center. It is reported that the flower will “follow” the sun as it crosses the sky. Dead-heading spent flowers will encourage flower production, although is not necessary for continual blooming.

Flowering months in Monroe County: All year

Fruit/Seed availability in Monroe County:

The seed is available all year.

Cultural Requirements

Light Requirements: Full sun

Salt Tolerance: High tolerance to windborne salt; the plant is a front-line coastal plant, growing directly on beach dunes. It is tolerant of salty soils and brief flooding but is not tolerant of long-term saltwater flooding.

Drought Tolerance: High once established.

Wind Tolerance: High

Soil Requirements: Well-drained sandy to rocky soils

Nutritional Requirements: Low

Propagation: Seed or stem-cuttings. East Coast dune sunflower will self-seed and germination can be encouraged by removing old plants.



Helianthus debilis subsp. *debilis* growing over rock border. Credit: M. Leonard-Mularz, UF/IFAS

Pests and diseases: Damp conditions, overcrowding, and overwatering can cause some fungal disease issues and root rot, but they are not common. Iguanas will feed on new growth and flowers. To discourage herbivory by iguanas, plant in a high-traffic area such as the front yard or along walkways.

Wildlife: The flowers are a nectar source for butterflies, bees, and other insect pollinators. The robust leafage

provides shelter for birds and other small creatures. Birds will feed on the seeds.

Warning: There are several subspecies of *Helianthus debilis*, and they readily hybridize with each other. The subspecies appropriate for the Florida Keys, is *H. debilis* subsp. *debilis*. It is recommended to use the subspecies that is native to our specific region.



Helianthus debilis subsp. *debilis* planted en masse in Key West. Credit: M. Leonard-Mularz, UF/IFAS

This article was reviewed by Marc Frank, Extension Botanist, UF/IFAS Plant Identification and Information Service, University of Florida Herbarium (FLAS).

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