

# COLUBRINA ASIATICA (L.) BRONGN.

Rhamnaceae/Buckthorn Family

**Common Names:** Latherleaf, Asiatic or common colubrina, hoop withe, Asian snakeroot

**Synonymy:** None

**Origin:** Old World

**Botanical Description:** Glabrous, evergreen, scrambling shrub with diffuse, slender branches to 5 m (16 ft) long; in older plants, stems to 15 m (49 ft) long. Leaves alternate, with slender petioles to 2 cm (3/4 in) long; blades oval, shiny dark green above, 4-9 cm (1.6-3.5 in) long and 2.5-5 cm (1-2 in) wide, with toothed margins and producing a thin lather when crushed and rubbed in water. Flowers small, greenish white, in short branched, few-flowered clusters at leaf axils; each with a nectar disc, 5 sepals, 5 hooded petals, and 5 stamens. Fruit a globose capsule, green and fleshy at first and turning brown upon drying, about 8 mm (1/3 in) wide, with 3 grayish seeds.

**NOTE:** Distinguished from the native colubrinas by its sprawling habit, glabrous stems, dull gray seeds, leaf blades with serrate margins, and 3 main veins from blade bases.

**Ecological Significance:** Thought to have been brought to Jamaica in 1850s by East Asian immigrants for traditional use as medicine, food, fish poison, and soap substitute (Burkill 1935, Perry 1980). Noted as naturalized in the Florida Keys and Everglades by Small (1933), and as aggressively spreading along these coasts by Morton (1976) and Austin (1978). Invades marly coastal ridges just above the mean high tide line (Russell *et al.* 1982), in tropical hammocks, buttonwood and mangrove forests, and tidal marshes (Schultz 1992). Also forms thickets on disturbed coastal roadsides. Can invade disturbed and undisturbed forest sites (Olmsted *et al.* 1981, Jones 1996). Forms a thick mat of entangled stems up to several feet deep, growing over and shading out native vegetation, including trees (Langeland 1990, Jones 1996). Of particular concern in Florida's coastal hammocks, where it threatens a number of rare, listed native plant species, such as mahogany, thatch palm, wild cinnamon, manchineel, cacti, bromeliads, and orchids (Jones 1996). Also found now in every park in the Keys, where it threatens rare natives such as bay cedar and beach star, and covers several acres in Blowing Rocks Preserve on Jupiter Island in Martin County (J. Duquesnel, Florida Park Service, 1994 personal communication).



Flowers

**Distribution:** Found naturally from eastern Africa to India, Southeast Asia, tropical Australia, and the Pacific Islands, including Hawaii, where it typically occurs as scattered plants on sandy and rock seashores (Brizicky 1964, Johnston 1971, Tomlinson 1980). From Jamaica, has spread in New World to other Caribbean islands, Mexico, and Florida, with the aid of ocean currents and storm tides (Russell *et al.* 1982). In Florida, now naturalized in coastal areas from Key West north to Hutchinson Island in St. Lucie County (Schultz 1992) and in Everglades National Park, including the Ten Thousand Islands northwest into Collier County (EPPC 1996).

**Life History:** Requires considerable light, with seedling growth rate increasing where shade removed; stems may grow 10 m (32 ft) in a single year (Schultz 1992). Forms adventitious roots where branches touch the ground. Vigorously resprouts from cut or injured stems. May reach seed-producing maturity within a year (Russell *et al.* 1982, Schultz 1992). Flowers in Florida most often in July, with fruits mature in September (Jones 1996), but reported as flowering year-round (Long and Lakela 1971, Wunderlin 1982). For germination, loose soil usually required, with seeds able to retain viability in soil for at least several years (Russell *et al.* 1982). Long-distance dispersal aided primarily by storms and extreme tides, which allow ocean currents to carry away the buoyant, salt-tolerant fruits and seeds (Carlquist 1966).



**Thickets (darker green) in coastal ridge, Everglades National Park (aerial view)**



**Leaves, flowers, fruit**