

Dense gayfeather

(*Liatris spicata*)

For definitions of botanical terms, visit en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_botanical_terms.

Known also as Dense blazing star, Marsh blazing star and Spiked blazing star, Dense gayfeather is an erect herbaceous perennial with striking spikes of purple flowers. It occurs naturally in mesic to wet flatwoods, seepage slopes, bogs, savannas and roadside ditches. It blooms in late summer through fall and is an excellent attractor of butterflies, bees and other beneficial insects.

Dense gayfeather begins as a basal rosette of linear, grasslike leaves. Flower stalks and buds appear in summer. Once all the buds have formed, the blooms open from the top of the flower stalk down. Flowering spikes are slender, elongated (up to 2 feet long) and, as the common name suggests, dense with flowers. Individual flowers are tubular, rayless and without pedicels. Styles are extended and often slightly twisted. Stems are smooth and unbranched. Stem leaves are linear and alternately arranged. Fruits are tiny, inconspicuous achenes.

The species epithet *spicata* is from the Latin *spicatus*, or “bearing or resembling a spike.” The common name “gayfeather” refers to the feather-like appearance of the slender flowering spike.

Family: Asteraceae (Aster, composite or daisy family)

Native range: Nearly throughout

To see where natural populations of Dense gayfeather have been vouchered, visit www.florida.plantatlas.usf.edu.

Hardiness: Zones 8A–11

Soil: Moist to moderately dry, well-drained sandy soils

Exposure: Full sun to minimal (high pine) shade

Growth habit: 1–5' tall

Propagation: Seed, division of corms

Garden tips: Dense gayfeather is easy to grow and, once established, requires little maintenance. It will die back in the winter, but will persist through prolific self-seeding and by production of new underground corms. Because of its somewhat brief flowering period (typically 2–3 weeks), it is best used in a mixed planting, although it is also quite attractive in a mass planting. The flower spikes can make the plant top-heavy, so plant with other tall species, such as grasses, goldenrods and sunflowers that can help support the plant and keep it upright.

Dense gayfeather seeds are often available from the Florida Wildflowers Growers Cooperative at www.FloridaWildflowers.com. Plants are occasionally available at nurseries that specialize in native plants. Visit PlantRealFlorida.org to find a native nursery on your area.



Dense gayfeather (*Liatris spicata*) with Palamedes swallowtail. Photo by Jeff Norcini