

Swamp Candles

Lysimachia terrestris

Myrsinaceae

(Previously *Primulaceae*)

by **Sindy Hempstead**

Swamp Candles really do light up swamps. The first time I saw them they were a glowing mass of yellow spikes covering the bottom of what, in wetter seasons, was a woodland pond. As a recent émigré from the cornfields of Illinois, having no idea what they were, I was doubly impressed.

Swamp-candles (*Lysimachia terrestris* L.) are also, confusingly, called Yellow Loosestrife, Swamp-loosestrife, or Bulbil-loosestrife¹—confusingly because some *Lythrum*s are also called Loosestrife, most notoriously, the invasive Purple Loosestrife, *Lythrum salicaria*. Any self-respecting *Lysimachiad* would emphatically inform you that the *Lythrum*s are not only in a different family, but also in a different order.

As to family, the genus *Lysimachia* has recently been split off from the Primrose Family (*Primulaceae*) into a new Family, *Myrsinaceae*. Keeping it company are Scarlet Pimpernel (*Anagallis arvensis*) and Star Flower (*Trientalis borealis*). The Primroses (*Primula* spp) and Shooting Stars (*Dodecatheon* spp) remain in *Primulaceae*, along with the rare Featherfoil (*Hottonia inflata*),² which would be a front-runner in any contest for the world's funniest looking plant.

The name *Lysimachia* is in honor of Lysimachus, bodyguard to Alexander the Great, later King of Thrace. Legend has it that Lysimachus, chased by a raging bull, pacified it by waving a branch of loosestrife in front of it, the plant having long been known for its calming properties. Hence, the name Loosestrife, or *Lysimachia*, could be a translation of the common name: *lysis* meaning "a release from" and *mache*, "strife." Linnaeus, thinking it was terrestrial mistletoe, named the species *terrestris*.^{3,4}

The clincher for identifying *L. terrestris* is its production in late summer of pointed, jointed bulbils in the leaf axils. The bulbils are about 6" long and turn dark brown as the season progresses. In June and July look for racemes of bright yellow pedicelled 0.4" flowers with 0.4" bracts on plants 8" to 24" tall with opposite, entire, lance-shaped leaves. One look-alike is another *Lysimachia*, the Garden Loosestrife (*L. vulgaris*), a garden escapee that is naturalized in the northeast. The Garden Loosestrife is taller, with larger leaves and a more compact raceme of larger (approximately 0.4" vs. 0.25") flowers. Also, *L. vulgaris* is "soft-hairy" whereas *L. terrestris* is smooth. Another look-alike is the unrelated Creeping St. John's-wort (*Hypericum adpressum*). In some ponds, close examination of what appears to be a mass of Creeping St. John's-wort in shallow water along the shore reveals that some of the yellow spikes are actually Swamp Candles. The edges of *H. adpressum*'s leaves are rolled under, "revolute," and the bracts in the racemes are minute.⁵

L. terrestris ranges throughout the northeast to Illinois and Minnesota, south to Kentucky and Tennessee.³ Recently it has found a new niche in cranberry bogs in Washington, Oregon and British Columbia. Rather than being welcomed as additions to western biodiversity, however, these plants are, to cranberry growers, (sigh) invasive weeds—this even though they are probably brought in involuntarily with commercial cranberry cuttings.⁸ In Rhode Island *L. terrestris* is relatively common along the shallow edges of many of our southern glacial ponds.



Cultivation

Cultivation of *L. terrestris* is not difficult. About all the plants ask for is wet soil and sun. One needn't live in a swamp to provide wet soil. A shovel, muscle and a lining of either clay or a sheet of plastic for the resulting hole, along with compost and lots of peat moss will do to set up a mini-bog. An easy way to provide the necessary water is to steer rainwater from your roof into your peat-filled hole. A rain barrel placed under a downspout gives more control than a direct pipe or trough, as long as the rain barrel has a valve near the bottom for a hose. A graywater system would be truly green, but more trouble. A two-foot square bog will hold a clump of Swamp Candles, but a larger one will allow room for other attractive wetland flowers as well. Some possibilities would include hot pink Meadow Beauty (*Rhexia virginica*), red Cardinal Flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*), blue Monkey Flower (*Mimulus ringens*), White Turtlehead (*Chelone glabra*), and bright pink Swamp Milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*), if you have plenty of room and like Monarch butterflies.

Propagation

Swamp Candles spread enthusiastically via stolons, and new ramets can be transplanted once they have developed a good root system. Imbedding the brown bulbils in wet sand in the fall results in new plants that can be set out in the bog garden in spring. New plants from seeds may or may not be true *L. terrestris*, given the promiscuity of the species, but then, the uncertainty might just add to the fun.

References

- ¹Gould, Lisa L., et al. 1998. *Vascular Flora of Rhode Island: A List of Native and Naturalized Plants*. RI Natural History Survey.
- ²Kallersjo, M., G., Bergqvist & A. A. Aderberg. 2000. Genetic realignment in primuloid families of the *Ericales* s. l.: a phylogenetic analysis based on DNA sequences from three chloroplast genes and morphology. *Amer. J. Bot.* 87: 1325-1341.
- ³Fernald, Merritt Lyndon. 1950. *Gray's Manual of Botany*. American Book Company. State?
- ⁴A Lake County Point of View: http://lakecounty.typepad.com/life_in_lake_county/2007/08/lysimachus-dog-.html
- ⁵Gleason, H.A., and Arthur Cronquist. 1991. *Manual of Vascular Plants of the Northeastern United States and Adjacent Canada, 2nd ed.* New York Botanic Garden, NY.
- ⁶Cooperrider, Tom S., and Bruce L. Brockett. 1974. *The nature and status of Lysimachia x producta* (Primulaceae). *Brittonia*, 26(2):119-128.
- ⁷Connecticut Botanical Society: www.ctbotanicalsociety.org/galleries/lysimachiahybr.html.
- ⁸Zika, Peter F. 2003. Notes on the provenance of some eastern wetland species disjunct in western North America. *Journal of the Torrey Botanical Society*. 130:43-46.

Illustration: *Swamp Candles*, from *How to know the Wild Flowers*, by Mrs. William Starr Dana. 1963. Dover, N.Y. Used with permission

RIWPS Policy

*Never dig plants in the wild or without the written permission of the landowner.
Take seeds sparingly*

The Rhode Island Wild Plant Society

PO Box 414

Exeter, RI 02822

401-789-7497

office@riwps.org

www.riwps.org