

***Cuphea hyssopifolia* Kunth**  
LYTHRACEAE

false heather

Synonyms: *Parsonia petiolata* (L.) Rusby  
*Cuphia petiolata* Koehne



**General Description.**—False heather is sometimes called cuphia, clammy cuphia, tarweed, elfin herb, or simply, heather (Griffiths 1992, Pope 1968). It is a woody, much branched shrub, although diminutive in size. While Howard (1989) states that the species may reach 70 cm in height and Turner and Wasson cite 60 cm as maximum height, 25 to 30 cm are more typical (Liogier 1994). A definite leader is maintained, but many of the lateral branches grow along the ground surface. The bark is reddish brown and stringy. The root system consists of a short taproot and many laterals of equal thickness. The tertiary roots are fibrous. The leaves are sessile, 1 to 3 cm long and linear, lanceolate, or oblanceolate. Young stems and the underside of leaves are pubescent. The small white, pink, violate, or reddish purple flowers appear in the axils of new leaves (Turner and Wasson 1997). There 5 to 8 ovules in each flower, and generally six 1-mm seeds per fruit (Howard 1989).

**Range.**—False heather is native from Mexico to

Panama (Howard 1989, Liogier 1994). It has been planted widely and has naturalized and escaped in at least Hawaii (Pope 1968), Puerto Rico (Liogier 1994), Montserrat, and St. Lucia (Howard 1989).

**Ecology.**—A moderate amount of disturbance is required for false heather to establish and maintain itself. Mowing, animal and vehicular traffic, and light cultivation are typical enabling disturbances. A moist climate (above 1400 mm of annual precipitation) is required for natural stands. It does not tolerate frost or salt (Watkins and Sheehan 1975). Partial shade from trees and light competition from grass and weeds are tolerated, but tall grass and heavy weeds will eliminate it. In Hawaii, false heather is most abundant in moist and partially shaded places above 240 m elevation (Pope 1968). Clayey and medium textured soils with good drainage are best. Japanese beetles (*Popillia japonica* Newman) sometimes defoliate it in Hawaii (Pope 1968).

**Reproduction.**—Flowering and seed production takes place constantly. The seeds are tiny (1.3 million per kg) and difficult to collect. The period between flowering and seed formation is short, and the seeds are expelled from the fruits at maturity. A germination test of 94 seeds on filter paper resulted in only two seeds germinating, over a period of 14 days. Seedlings are not uncommon on moist, disturbed soil. False heather also reproduces by layering whenever horizontal branches touch the ground. Both seedlings and layers are important in the maintenance of natural stands. Obtaining new plants from seed is difficult. Nursery plants are reproduced by cuttings; tips will root any time of year (Watkins and Sheehan 1975). Artificial reproduction by air and ground layers is also possible.

**Growth and Management.**—False heather is a short-lived plant except when layering prolongs its life. After about 1 year, most plants begin a decline in vigor and eventually die. Renewal of decadent older plants can be promoted by mowing at about 5 cm height, which cuts away the old plant structure from the newly layered branches.

Nursery plants should be watered during dry periods or as needed and given frequent light fertilizer applications. False heather is susceptible to nematodes. Use of nematode-free media is recommended (Watkins and Sheehan 1975).

**Benefits.**—False heather has been cultivated widely as an ornamental. It is used as a potted plant, for low borders, and as ground cover in small beds. False heather may become a weed in warm climates (Turner and Wasson 1997) and has become a serious weed in some parts of Hawaii (Pope 1968).

### References

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