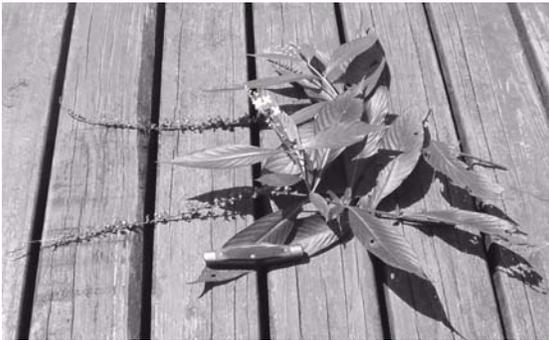


***Gonzalagunia hirsuta* (Jacq.) K. Schum.**
RUBIACEAE

rabo de ratón

Synonyms: *Barleria hirsuta* (Jacq.) Jacq.
Coccocypselum spicatum (Lam.) HBK
Duggena hirsuta (Jacq.) Britton & Wilson
D. richardii West
D. spicata (Lam.) Gómez
Gonzalagunia spicata (Lam.) DC.
G. coccocypselum C. & S.
Gonzalia spicata (Lam.) Standl.
Heydyotis secunda Spreng. ex Schultes
Justicia hirsuta Jacq.
Lygistum spicatum Lam.



General Description.—Rabo de ratón, also known as mata de mariposa, palo pelado, yerba pelada, bios-foufou, and bois colibri (Howard 1989, Liogier 1997), is a suberect, medium-sized shrub. It has membranous, opposite, ovate to lanceolate leaves, 6.5 to 19.0 cm in length and 2.0 to 8.5 cm in width (Howard 1989) with pronounced, sunken veins. Plants usually have single straight stems but begin branching near the ground. The branches and twigs are slender and sometimes extend a meter horizontally.

Range.—The natural range of rabo de ratón includes Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, the Lesser Antilles, Trinidad, Venezuela, the Guayanas, and northern Brazil (Howard 1989). The species is not known to have naturalized elsewhere.

Ecology.—Rabo de ratón is intolerant and requires disturbance to grow and reproduce. It is most frequently found in brushy pastures, in early secondary forests after abandonment of cultivation, in tree-fall gaps and other disturbed areas in advanced secondary forests, and along

roads. In a Puerto Rican study (Myster and Walker 1997), rabo de ratón was the fifth most common species colonizing recent landslides. Dense thickets sometimes form. The species grows in areas receiving from about 1100 to 3400 mm of annual rainfall and at elevations ranging from near sea level to more than 600 m. Apparently, all types of soils are colonized, if not excessively well drained or very poorly drained. The root system is shallow, much branched, and extensive.

Reproduction.—Rabo de rató begins flowering near the end of its first year. The inflorescences, which arise from leaf axils, are spiciform-paniculate and up 56 cm in length. The flowers are white with four or five lobes (Liogier 1997). Flowering and fruiting begin at the base and progress toward the tip. The flowers are pollinated by butterflies and small insects. When the inflorescence is laden with fruit progressing in size from base to tip, it resembles a mouse's tail—hence the name, rabo de ratón (Vélez and von Overbeek 1950). An inflorescence may contain 100 or more fruits. The fruits are two-seeded fleshy drupes that are white, turning pink, violet, or blue (Howard 1989) and are available most of the year. The fruits in a Puerto Rican collection averaged 0.0885 ± 0.0419 g and contained seeds numbering 182,000/kg. Seeds in this collection failed to germinate (Francis and Rodríguez 1993). Another collection from Puerto Rico had between 55 and 68 percent germination in a field test. Of those failing to germinate, about 5 percent were lost to pathogens. There was no significant predation (Myster 1997). The seeds are dispersed by birds (Parrotta 1995).

Growth and Management.—Rabo de ratón is fast growing and may reach 4 m in height and 3 cm in lower stem diameter. Individual plants usually live 1 to 2 years (Vélez and von Overbeek 1950). The species can probably be established by traditional methods (planted seedlings and direct seeding), but no plantations have been reported. Natural reproduction may be encouraged by cultivation near seed sources.

Benefits.—Rabo de rató is beneficial to the environment in that it readily invades and helps to stabilize disturbed areas. Because the shrub forms a thin canopy, it does not inhibit the invasion of later successional vegetation. While probably not suitable for formal gardens, rabo de rató would contribute to wildflower gardens, forest parks, and greenbelts. The species is an abundant producer of fruits that are eaten by birds.

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