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A GARDEN VOLUNTEER

A *volunteer* is a plant that appears naturally in the garden. Unwanted volunteers are the commonly recognized weeds we seem to continually battle. Surprise volunteers maybe the seedlings of nearby perennials or annuals that you must decide whether to allow to stay, to transplant or to relegate to the compost. Sometimes an unusual, 'I have no idea!' volunteer appears.



One such plant appeared on the edge of my dwarf forsythia bed – a rather cute looking plant that was about eight inches high when I first noticed it about six weeks ago. Was this a plant I should plant elsewhere, telling it to be happy or compost it? I snapped the photo of the little plant shown and consulted various gardening and reference books – no luck. I then sent the photo to a few of our plant-savvy garden club ladies who were also stumped. I finally did a bit of extensive sleuthing online, googling various descriptive possibilities.

About ninety minutes later, I finally found a single photo with the caption 'Sicklepod!' I never heard of it! I then did more research to determine if it would be a keeper.

Sicklepod, *Senna obtusifolia* (meaning blunt leaved) is a herbaceous perennial of the legume family that quickly grows to a bushy 30 inches or more, with one inch, bright yellow flowers that eventually turn into a sickle shaped seed pod, hence the name. It is native to southeastern United States and considered an agricultural invasive plant in California, Texas and other places.

There seems to be inconsistent information about it. As a herbaceous perennial it is considered toxic in the raw state affecting kidney, liver and muscle function, but boiled it can be served as a vegetable! The dried seeds can be roasted as a coffee substitute or boiled as a tea. One botanical source suggested that it can be grown as an ornamental accent in cottage, wildflower or native plant gardens. In the Southeast it is called 'coffee bean' and is considered poisonous to livestock, and an invasive in sugar cane fields, grain fields and pastures. The FDA lists it on its poisonous plant database. Yet, modern research reports health benefits including lowering cholesterol and antioxidant protection.



As cute as my sicklepod *volunteer* would look in a wildflower garden, it's headed to the compost. My plan was to let it bloom then yank it. Buds were just forming (photo) this past week, then winds from the remains of Hurricane Ida toppled it for me. As with many volunteer plants, it is a mystery how it got there.