

Dame's Rocket

Hesperis matronalis

Look for Dame's Rocket in moist areas of full sun or partial shade.

Dame's rocket is a tall, showy perennial in the mustard family. Preferred habitats include lowland forests, moist meadows, woodland edges and openings, open woods, thickets, semi-shaded fencerows, and banks of ditches and roadsides. A prolific seed-producer, it often grows in extensive stands and has the potential to crowd out native species.



First-year plants are ground-level rosettes that stay green all winter. In early spring, the plant sends up a 2-4' tall flower stem with long lance-shaped leaves that are attached alternately along the stem. Leaves decrease in size up the stem. There are widely spaced teeth along the leaf edges, and both stems and leaves are covered with fine hairs.

Flowers appear in clusters from the upper parts of the plant. Each flower has 4 petals, with colors on different plants ranging from purple or pink to white; blossoms are $\frac{3}{4}$ - 1 inch wide. If flowering parts are cut off, plants often will bloom again. Dame's Rocket resembles garden Phlox but Phlox blossoms have 5 petals and the leaves grow opposite along the stem. Plants produce abundant seeds and the seeds remain viable in the soil for many years.

The young leaves are rich in vitamin C, resemble arugula, and can be eaten raw in salads; the sprouted seeds are also edible. Dame's rocket has been used medicinally to induce sweating, promote urination, loosen a cough, treat or prevent scurvy, substitute for the emetic ipecac, and serve as a most efficacious cure for stings and the bites of serpents. When in flower, the plant is rumored to be an aphrodisiac.

Dame's rocket is a food source for caterpillars as well as a nectar source for butterflies, moths, and hummingbirds. The flowers are good for cutting and will lend their welcome perfume to the room in which they are placed. The plant is actually cultivated for its essential seed-oil to be used in perfumes.

Dames' Rocket blooms mid-May through July, although some plants may bloom until August if warm weather doesn't shorten the duration.