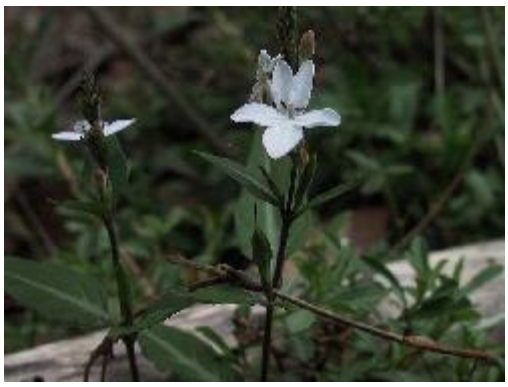
Pseuderanthemum variabile: a charming forest inhabitant

By Jennifer Liney

Growing in a variety of coastal habitats, particularly in moist forests and rainforest margins, is a small persistent flowering plant with lanceolate to ovate shaped dark green leaves about 5cm long and up to 4cm wide with cystoliths – now that is a good word - (i.e., short hairs with a little transparent gland at the base) on the upper surface, and often purple underneath.

The flowers are a pretty faintly pink to pale mauve with five petals that are arranged about the flower's centre with two small petals at the top and three larger ones below. The central lower petal has tiny dark purple spots near the throat of the flower; this would be to guide nectar feeding animals or insects in the right direction – all in the interests of pollination. The flowers are from 1½ to 2cm wide across through the longest axis, so they are not very big, but because of the intensity of the colour, they are quite noticeable. They are terminal on a short spike, but only one or two flowers mature at any one time.



This is *Pseuderanthemum variabile,* flowering during the warmer months of January to March.
(Photo by Jackie Miles, copied with permission from her website [*http://thebegavalley.org.au/plants.html*](http://thebegavalley.org.au/plants.html) *)*
When the plant is growing in the shade in fairly moist conditions, the leaves are quite large (for *Pseuderanthemum*) and very dark green; also the flowers are a deeper hue than those of plants in dryer, more open situations, where they appear to be smaller and rather faded. It is commonly called Pastel Flower, quite an appropriate name.

Butterfly larva feed on the plants at night, while bearded dragons have a liking for the flowers.

The generic name is quite a mouthful, but it does make sense when taken apart. It was first named *Eranthus variable* by Robert Brown in 1810 (he collected it from 'Port Jackson') after a northern hemisphere genus *Eranthemum*, which means lovely flower in old Greek. Robert Brown considered that this New Holland species resembled the genus he knew. The specific name *variabile* is self-explanatory – as one would imagine, it means variable. However, Ludwig Adolf Timotheus Radlkofer, (a name that has a grand ring to it) a 19th century German physician who later gained a PhD in botany and who worked extensively in Europe and the US, argued that though the species might resemble *Eranthemum*, it is only a resemblance, so in 1884 he published a paper which added the prefix *pseudo* to the name, thus indicating that it is a false *Eranthemum*, and not the real deal.

Radlkofer never travelled to Australia. Instead botanists from all over the world sent him specimens to work on. His collection still exists and is housed in Munich.

This explanation of the name came as quite a surprise to me. I had always assumed that it had some connection with anthers. Which goes to show that one should never make assumptions; take the time to look it up.