



The Sabal

November 2019

Volume 36, number 8

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Plant species page #s in the Sabal refer to:
 “Plants of Deep South Texas” (PDST).

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NPP meeting topic/speaker:

“Soil 101” by *Mike Heep*
Tues., November 26th, at 7:30pm

A talk by native plant nurseryman Mike Heep is always a treat. This month he’s agreed to talk with us about soil. We’re losing topsoil around the world at an alarming rate, paving it over, bulldozing it away and blowing it to who knows where. Mike lends his years of teaching experience at UT-Edinburg (now UTRVG) to each of his presentations. He has studied our soils and native plants for most of his life.

Mike Heep is first and foremost, a dad. Thanks to Ciara Heep for his photo!

The meeting is at: **Valley Nature Center,**
 301 S Border, (Gibson Park), Weslaco. 956-969-2475.

Photo right: Fruiting structures of *Ayenia limitaris*, PDST 403, one of our rare plants. Due to recent rains, it may be doing fairly well. It’s something to watch for in the wild. Mike Heep discovered a colony of Ayenia in Harlingen’s C.B.Wood Park, where there has been virtually no concerted effort to keep the colony safe from human encroachment.



The Sabal is the newsletter of the Native Plant Project.

It conveys information on native plants, habitats and environment of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas.

Previous **Sabal** issues are posted on our website [www.NativePlantProject.org].

Electronic versions of our **Handbooks** on recommended natives for landscaping are also posted there.

Change of address, missing issue, or membership: <bwessling@rgv.rr.com>

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In Search of Instant Gratification —by Christina Mild

Humans are typically impatient, me included. Big-box nurseries intensify this desire, providing specimens already in full bloom and ready for planting. Contrast that with buying a native from Mike Heep. Quite often, as he hands you the plant, he is chopping off the blooms! This triggers the plant to grow more roots and leaves when you transplant it (shunting energy away from producing blooms and mature fruit).

Realizing this burning desire for fast results in attracting critters with blooms and fruit, here are a couple of natives which grow quickly and produce rewards fairly soon after planting.



Frostweed, *Verbesina microptera*. PDST 134-35.

Family: Compositae.

Perennial with a woody base. Propagated via transplanted tubers or seed. Blooming summer thru fall. Attracts a wide range of butterflies and other nectarers and pollinators. Relatively large seeds are eaten by birds and other critters. Attains a height of 6', quickly, in favorable conditions (enough water). Cutting the plants back after they dry out will promote regrowth.

Try planting several of the same species in different locations. They may bloom and fruit at different times due to small differences in sun, soil and available moisture.



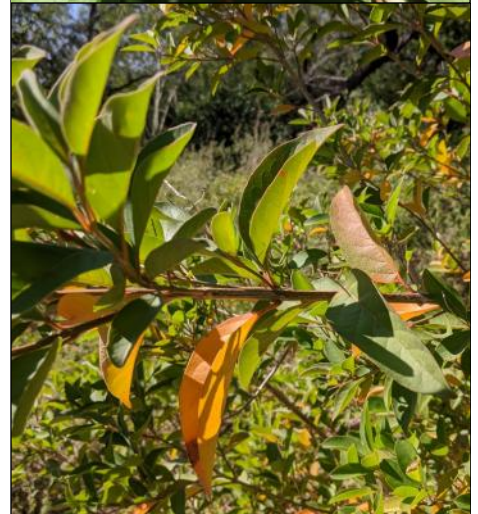
Berlandier's Fiddlewood, Negrito, Orcajuela, *Citharexylum berlandieri*, PDST 412. Verbenaceae. (excerpted from: [aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu])

Produces (white) flower spikes and a great profusion of berries that are relished by wildlife in many seasons.

It can be a large unarmed shrub or a small, gnarled tree to 18 feet high. It is not common in its native southern Rio Grande Plains, found in thickets, flats and hillsides, and has many qualities which recommend it for landscape use in zone 9. It flowers in many seasons depending on moisture. Upright racemes of fragrant white flowers attract butterflies and other pollinators. The profuse, lustrous berry clusters, orange ripening to black, are very striking and contrast brightly with the glossy green leaves and the mottled gray bark. Its dense growth habit provides cover and nest areas for birds, and makes it useful as a hedge. It thrives in hot, dry climates without wilting; during times of extreme drought, the leaves become tinted with orange. It is cold hardy only as far north as San Antonio. The names fiddlewood and zitherwood, as well as the genus name *Citharexylum*, refer to the fact that musical instruments were made from related species.

Ripe black berries are tasty. Fruit/nectar-eating butterflies such as the Mexican Bluewing, extract the juices. Seeds resemble cloven hooves.

Grows quickly, responds well to pruning, and is thornless.



Providing for Butterflies. Butterfly season peaks during October, when many of our best butterfly nectar plants are blooming. The season never really ends here, as long as temperatures are high enough for butterflies to take flight. Here are some fall and winter-blooming, butterfly-attracting species.



Mexican Buttonbush, *Cephalanthus salicifolius*, PDST 369. Rubiaceae. Rare in the wild. (Grows in increasingly-disturbed soils adjacent to the Rio Grande.) Does well in cultivation. Thornless shrub. Excellent butterfly nectar.



Mexican Trixis, *Trixis inula*, PDST 133. Asteraceae. Thornless with large leaves, does well with enough moisture. May bloom throughout the year. In cultivation, it grows to 6' or more. Found throughout deep south Texas.



Hierba de alacran, *Plumbago scandens*, PDST 352. Plumbaginaceae. Blooms spring through fall. Produces sprawling colonies. Sticky seed capsules are messy. Excellent butterfly nectar. Thornless. Leaves exhibit reddish hue when stressed.

Amazing Wintertime Nectar for many Nectarers and Pollinators.

Chomonque, *Gochnatia hypoleuca*, PDST 101. Asteraceae. (unusual 2-lipped flowers) May bloom from fall thru spring, depending on moisture. Found on dry gravelly hills and upland pockets of sand in Hidalgo and Starr counties. Not widely-propagated, but excellent in cultivation. Contrast between the upper and lower leaf surface color is lovely. One of our most reliable winter-time bloomers.

If you're unable to procure this plant, consider *Bastardia viscosa*, PDST 307. Smelly leaves, but worth it.



Winter Fruits and Seeds for Birds and other Critters. Some species will provide fruits/seeds during winter. Here are a few which are fruiting around Harlingen, TX.



Desert Christmas Cactus, Tasajillo, *Opuntia leptocaulis*, PDST 171. If you've ever fallen into this plant, it's likely on your "do not encounter" list. It is unusual in that stems will branch off from the fruits. Many birds rely on these fruits during winter.

Snake Eyes, *Phaulothamnus spinescens*, PDST 55. Phytolaccaceae (now Achatocarpaceae). Fruits appear on female plants after summer or fall blooms. Leaves are somewhat fleshy. Stems have a blackish tint (which helps to distinguish it from Elbowbush). Mike Heep points out that the thorny ends of these branches are relatively soft. He recommends escaping through Snake Eyes if you're stuck somewhere in the brush. It works! It would be great to have photos of animals eating these fruits.



Coyotillo, *Karwinskia humboldtiana*, PDST 366. Spring and summer blooms are usual; Harlingen Thicket is loaded with immature fruit right now. Fruit is eaten by coyotes, chachalacas and other critters; they're poisonous if eaten by humans. Two-barred Flasher host.



Prickly Poppy, *Argemone sanguinea*, PDST 345. Usually blooming in spring or summer, breakout blooms can appear anytime. Usually buzzing with pollinators, these will provide seed for doves and other critters. Sharply pointed leaves and many spines.





A Closer Look at Coma.

Sideroxylon celastrinum, PDST 382. Sapotaceae.

In Ramsey Park and Harlingen Thicket, Coma is abuzz with pollinators. On careful inspection of my photos, it's apparent that a small fraction of blooms are actually open, but the sweet aroma is already strong. Blooms may occur from spring thru fall.

Mature black fruits are sweet and sticky (chicle). Don't try them if you have braces!

On the far left is a curved leaf which lends the name (coma is comma in spanish).



Coma leaves are distinctive. From a distance the foliage is shiny; the epidermis is slick. A mature leaf, when bent, will usually snap cleanly at the bend. Leaves feel leathery.

Bottom Left: enlargement of open blooms; they are only about 3/16" in size.

This is probably a good choice for **Pollinator-themed gardens**, as a peripheral shrub.

Coma is sometimes difficult to establish, perhaps due to predation or slow initial growth. Once established, Coma will form an impenetrable thicket (Comal) from root sprouts.

Inset, center left: Moth caterpillar, probably an Arctiid (Tiger Moth) perhaps Santa Ana Tussock Moth, found on a coma leaf.





Blooming Now on Arroyo Banks.

Sprawling Lippia, Brushy Lippia, *Lippia alba*, PDST 417. Verbenaceae.

Note the enlargement on right, which shows the ridges typical of Verbenaceae. Flowers are only about 1/8". In Texas, ours is the only locality where this grows. It occurs on the banks or the arroyo, the river, and pond edges. The root system helps to combat erosion; stems may root also.

Leaves are aromatic.



Sapindaceae Vines:
Fall is a Good Time for Identification.

Several vines in the Soapberry family are important to wildlife, especially pollinators.

Similar leaves make it difficult to distinguish them. When they bear fruits, especially mature ones, it's easier to know what you've found.

Note: continued exposure of these vines to the skin may cause contact dermatitis. They produce saponins, known irritants.



Mexican Urvillea,
Urvillea ulmacea, PDST 381.
Fruits are 3-sided (each side bears a seed), hollow, and shaped like a football.



Serjania, *Serjania brachycarpa*, PDST 381. Seeds have three centrally-fused wings; each bears a seed at the base. Mature seeds take on a reddish coloration, and are often mistaken for flowers.

Not pictured: Common Balloon Vine, *Cardiospermum halicababum*, PDST 380, is another Sapindaceae vine. The hollow balloons which hold seed are easy to identify.

This Sapindaceae, probably *Urvillea*, appears ready to bloom again, in November. All of these vines are excellent sources of nectar and pollen. In dry times, they are virtually absent in the wild, but reappear after rains.

LRGV Native Plant Sources

See also our
Sponsors on right

Perez Ranch Nursery

(Betty Perez)

12 miles north of La Joya, TX

(956) 580-8915

<PerezRanchNatives@gmail.com>

These vendors may sell exotics:

National Butterfly Center

Old Military Hwy/3333 Butterfly Pk Dr
Mission, TX 78572

office 956-583-5400x754 Max Munoz

<max@nationalbutterflycenter.org>

[<http://www.nationalbutterflycenter.org>]

Rancho Lomitas Nursery

(Benito Trevino)

P.O. Box 442

Rio Grande City, TX 78582

(956) 486-2576 *By appt. only

Valley Garden Center

701 E. Bus. Hwy. 83

McAllen, TX 78501

(956) 682-9411

M&G Double D Native Plants & Seeds of South Texas, (Gail Dantzker)

956-342-5979; <gdld@att.net>

7500 N 21st St; McAllen, TX 78504

[mandgdoubled.com]

Grown at The Woods, Willacy Cty., TX.

Landscapers using Natives:

Landscaping, Etc. Inc.

Noel Villarreal

125 N. Tower Rd, Edinburg

956-874-4267, 956-316-2599

Sponsors (Native Plant Nurseries)

Heep's LRGV Native Plant Nursery

Owned and operated by Mike and Claire Heep

We grow plants suited to landscaping
and revegetation in south Texas.

1714 S. Palm Court Drive, Harlingen, TX 78552

(956) 457-6834 <heep0311@yahoo.com>

[www.heepsnursery.com]



Come visit the VNC:

301 S. Border Ave.

Weslaco, TX 78596

(956) 969-2475

info@valleynaturecenter.org

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Enlarged photo of plant underside.

Low Wild Mercury, *Ditaxis humilis*, (older: *Argythamnia sp.*)
PDST 220. Euphorbiaceae.
Common, low-growing. Seeds eaten by bobwhite quail and mourning doves. Leaves eaten by white-tailed deer and cattle. Growing now on arroyo banks at Ramsey Park. Note hairy 3-part seeds. Blooms are tiny and star-like.

NPP Board & General Meetings are held at
Valley Nature Center

(4th Tues. each month, except thru summer)

Brd Mtgs 6:30pm — Speaker 7:30pm

(upcoming meetings)

1/28, 2/25, 3/24, 4/28, 5/26/2020

(*No meetings during summer or in December.)



FROM: NPP; POB 2742; San Juan, TX 78589

The **Native Plant Project (NPP)** has no paid staff or facilities. NPP is supported entirely by memberships and contributions.

Anyone interested in native plants is invited to join. Members receive 8 issues of **The Sabal** newsletter per year in which they are informed of all project activities and meetings.

Meetings are held at:

Valley Nature Center, 301 S. Border, Weslaco, TX.

Native Plant Project Membership Application

Regular \$20/yr. Contributing \$45/yr

Life \$250 one time fee/person

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NPP meeting/speaker:

The Native Plant Project
will present:

“Soil 101” by *Mike Heep*

Tues., Nov. 26th, at 7:30pm

The meeting is held at
Valley Nature Center,
301 S Border, (in Gibson Park),
Weslaco. 956-969-2475.

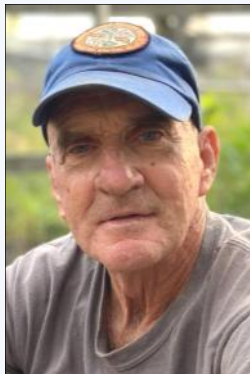


Photo by Ciara Heep.

We hope to see you there!
Feel free to bring a native plant for identification.
Native Plants are available for a donation!



Photo above: Common Ball Moss, young seedling on Coma. This species perches in shrubs and trees. It relies on moisture in the air and nutrients in the wind, as well as photosynthesis. This closeup shows the epidermis, which resembles a gray velvet cloth or toweling, a perfect surface to absorb dew and humidity. High humidity in Florida causes the plant to become a pest, growing en masse and becoming too heavy for powerlines.

Scientific Name: *Tillandsia recurvata*
Family: Bromeliaceae
(PDST 28-29)

Species In this issue:

Ayenia limitaris, Verbesina microptera, Citharexylum berlandieri, Cephalanthus salicifolius, Trixis inula, Plumbago scandens, Gochnatia hypoleuca, Phaulothamnus spinescens, Opuntia leptocaulis, Karwinskia humboldtiana, Argemone sanguinea, Sideroxylon celastrinum, Lippia alba, Urvillea ulmacea, Serjania brachycarpa, Ditaxis humilis, Tillandsia recurvata.