



# The Sabal

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## Uses of Native Plants Found at Parras de la Fuente

by Chris Hathcock,

Secretary NPP Board of Directors and Border Project  
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This past summer, I had the privilege of working at Parras de la Fuente, a several-thousand-acre ecological preserve in Tamaulipas, Mexico, 50 miles west-northwest of Ciudad Victoria and 150 miles south of the LRGV. The preserve lies between the foothills of the Sierra de Tamaulipas and the Río Soto la Marina, where it ranges in elevation from 300 to 700 feet above sea-level. Dominant vegetation is *Matorral Espinoso Tamaulipeco* (Tamaulipan Thorn-Shrubland), but *Matorral Submontano* (Sub-Montaine Shrubland) and *Selva Baja Espinosa* (Low Thorn-Forest) also occur.

Parras hosts the largest breeding colony of the region's white-winged dove sub-species, and my main task while there was assisting with the Tamaulipas Wildlife Commission's dove-banding project. Between checks of funnel-traps and mist-nets for doves, however, I was able to photograph and record information about plants.

To gain insights into regional differences in plant common names and uses, I focused on species whose native range encompasses both Parras and the LRGV. Unless indicated otherwise, all species mentioned in this article are native to both regions. Incidentally, I found that several species native to, but rare or uncommon in the LRGV are quite common at Parras. Most notable of these are vara blanca (*Capparis incana*), chomonque (*Gochmatia hypoleuca*), limoncillo (*Esenbeckia runyonii*), and baretta (*Helietta parvifolia*).

I learned a lot about the regional common names and uses of native plants found at Parras through my dove-banding partner, Rito Hernandez. Table 1 summarizes this information for many of the plants we encountered in the field. Rito grew up in Las Delicias, a small farming village next to Parras, and still lives there with his wife and young children. He told me that he learned about local plants from his father, and passes this knowledge along to his own children. Fortunately, he was very willing to share it with me as well.

Many species we came across are routinely used by people of the region. One of the first plants Rito showed me was a small, fragrant herb called “benadita”, which he says is often used to make a tea that children like. The plant is common along the roads cutting through the reserve. I have yet to identify the species and do not know if it occurs in the LRGV.

Rito also explained how vara dulce (*Eysenhardtia texana*, Texas kidneywood) is soaked in water until the water turns blue. The blue water is then given to chickens to cure their stomach ailments. Additionally, ramoncillo (*Dalea scandens*; *thyrus dalea*) plants are used as brooms for household cleaning. As soon as Rito broke off a branch from one and swept it back-and-forth over the ground, it was apparent how their flexible limbs and soft, compact leaves and leaflets could indeed be well-suited for this purpose.

Several tree species in and around Parras are commonly harvested for their wood. Species such as tenaza (*Havardia pallens*), baretta, limoncillo, and vara blanca are highly sought after for fence posts and slats because of their characteristically long, straight, and relatively thick trunks. A very common small tree species having a slim and straight trunk, locally referred to as “palo blanco” (a species not native to the LRGV), is most often used when thinner posts and slats are called for. Other species, such as



**Above:** Blooms of emergent tenaza trees are conspicuous while overlooking thorn-shrubland from one of Parras de la Fuente’s look-out towers.



ébano (*Ebenopsis ebano*, Texas ebony), mezquite (*Prosopis glandulos*, honey mesquite), and brasíl (*Condalia hookeri*), are appreciated for their grain and hardness in building cabinets and furniture, and producing charcoal. Tree harvesting represents a significant threat to Parras and other natural areas in the region.

Often when I asked Rito about the human use of a particular plant, his response was “*No sirve para nada*” (it’s not good for anything). In many cases though, he had knowledge of the plant that was of practical value. For instance, he said that silvestre, also known locally as “solemán”

(*Croton cortesianus*, Cortes croton) is poisonous to goats. Oreja de ratón (*Bernardia myricifolia*), on the other hand, is okay for and well-liked by cows.

Other plants about which he said “no sirve para nada” include the following:

- amapola (*Hibiscus martianus*, heart-leaf hibiscus)
- baretta china (*Amyris madrensis*, Sierra Madre torchwood)
- cruceto (*Rhandia rhagocarpa*, crucillo)
- garbancillo (*Coursetia axillaris*, Texas baby bonnets)
- gavia (*Acacia rigidula*, blackbrush)
- ocotillo (*Gochnatia hypoleuca*; chomonque)



**Left:** Rito Hernandez displays a common roadside herb he calls “benadita”, which is used to make a tea liked by children.

**Below:** Baretta and tenaza are often used for large fence posts (lower right), while smaller trees like palo blanco are more appropriate for wood-slat building walls (lower left), fence slats (upper left), and lattice fences (upper right).



polocote (*Helianthus annuus*; sunflower)  
 revienta cabras (*Citharexylum berlandieri*;  
 Berlandier's fiddlewood)

Despite their lack of direct utility, however, all these species have significant indirect benefits to people. Mexico is currently the fifth largest

producer and third largest exporter of honey. These and many other native plant species are recognized by the Tamaulipas Agriculture Department as important to the state's bee-product industry because they provide nectar and pollen that domestic European bees use to produce honey and wax.

**Table 1. Local Names and Uses of Selected Native Plants found at Parras de la Fuente**

Local Name	Scientific Name and LRGV Common Name (if different)	Uses
anacua	<i>Ehretia anacua</i>	fruit is eaten by chachalacas, chickens, and people (alone or with cream); landscape tree in villages
baretta	<i>Helietta parvifolia</i>	prized for fence posts; bark extract is anesthetic for toothaches and wounds
brasíl	<i>Condalia hookeri</i>	excellent firewood for heating houses
chapote	<i>Diospyros texana</i> , Texas persimmon	fruit is eaten by people and foxes
limoncillo	<i>Esenbeckia runyonii</i> , jopoy	fence posts
nacahua, nacahuita	<i>Cordia boissieri</i> , Mexican olive, anacahuita	fruit is eaten by coyotes
oregano	<i>Lippia graveolens</i> , redbrush lippia	used commonly in menudo (a spicy tripe and hominy soup)
palma	<i>Yucca treculeana</i> , Spanish dagger	flowers (chochas) used like lettuce for salads
ramoncillo	<i>Dalea scandens</i> , thyrus dalea	make-shift broom for sweeping
salvia	<i>Croton incanus</i> , Torrey croton	used for tea
tenaza	<i>Havardia pallens</i>	fence posts
tullidor	<i>Karwinskia humboldtiana</i> , coyotillo	eaten by foxes
vara blanca	<i>Capparis incana</i>	fencing and lattices; fruit is an important food source for wildlife
vara dulce, barra azul, palo azul	<i>Eysenhardtia texana</i> , Texas kidneywood	cures stomach ailments of chickens





Above: Though extremely rare in the LRGV, vara blanca is a common shrub/small tree at Parras, where its fleshy red fruits are eaten by a variety of wildlife. Below: Corva de la gallina (*Neophringlea integrifolia*; a tree species not native to the LRGV) is one of Parras' most important food sources for granivorous wildlife, which eat the seed from its three-winged samara fruit.



## Nature Happenings Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas

For a comprehensive calendar of Nature Happenings go to **RGV Nature Coalition** at [www.rgvnaturecoalition.org](http://www.rgvnaturecoalition.org) Scroll down to and click on Nature Events Calendar on right side.

**Edinburg Scenic Wetlands and World Birding Center — Birding, butterflies, caterpillars, bats, and photography programs** Call Marisa (956) 381-9922 or go to [www.edinburgwbc.org](http://www.edinburgwbc.org) for schedule 714 Raul Longoria Rd., Edinburg, TX

**Quinta Mazatlan - McAllen Wing of the World Birding Center—** 600 Sunset Ave., McAllen, TX. Call Colleen Hook (956) 688-3370 for scheduled events.

**Bentsen Rio Grande Valley State Park WBC** offers butterfly walks, bird walks, nature tours. Call 956-584-9156 for details and times.

**Santa Ana NWR** near Alamo offers **Nature Tram rides** with Interpreters at 9:30 a.m., 12 noon and 2:00 p.m. every day (956) 784-7500 or

**Valley Nature Center** (956) 969-2475 301 S. Border Ave., Weslaco

**Estero Llano Grande State Park WBC** - 3301 International Blvd. (FM 1015) in Weslaco, TX Call (956) 565-3919 for scheduled events.

**Valley Proud Environmental Council** from bagging grass clippings to Captain Crab puppet shows. Call Laura Maxwell 956-412-8004, [vpec@sbcglobal.net](mailto:vpec@sbcglobal.net) or visit [www.valleyproud.org](http://www.valleyproud.org)

**15th Annual RGV Birding Festival, November 6-9, at the Municipal Auditorium Complex in Harlingen, TX.** The Native Plant Project will be selling many varieties of Mike Heep's healthy native plants at the Festival. 1 gallon plants are \$6.50 each, or 5 or more are discounted to \$5.00 each. Questions about growing natives? Stop by and get the answers from the NPP booth at the Expo Marketplace, noon - close (Sat. 10 - close).

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The Sabal is the Newsletter of the Native Plant Project and conveys information on the native habitat, and environment of the Lower Rio Grande Valley Texas. Co-editors: Gene Lester and Eleanor Mosimann. You are invited to submit articles for *The Sabal*. They can be brief or long. Articles may be edited for length and clarity. Black and white line drawings -- and colored photos or drawings -- with or without accompanying text are encouraged. We will acknowledge all submissions. Please send them, preferable in electronic form - either Word or WordPerfect - to: Native Plant Project, P.O. Box 2742, San Juan, TX 78589 or contact **Gene Lester at 956-682-0549, or g-el1951@sbcglobal.net**

See *The Sabal* and our 5 handbooks on our website:  
**www.nativeplantproject.org**

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**Native Plant Project Annual Membership Application Form**

Regular \$15 per year  Contributing \$35 per year  Lifelong \$250 one time fee per individual. Members are advised of meetings, field trips, and other activities through *The Sabal*. Dues are paid on a calendar year basis. Send checks to Native Plant Project, P.O. Box 2742, San Juan, Texas 78589.

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Native Plant Project Meetings – October 28, 2008. **Board meeting** at 6:30 p.m.; **General meeting** at 7:30 p.m. Ken King, educator and native plant expert, will present "Less Well Known Plants of the LRGV". Need a plant identified? Bring a cutting.

**Board and General Meetings 2008 and 2009:**

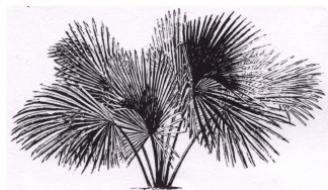
September 23	October 28	<b>2009:</b>	January 27	February 24	March 24
	November 25		April 28	May 26	

**SUMMARY OF THE MINUTES OF THE BOARD MEETING - September 23, 2008**

The board discussed possible topics for future NPP native-plant handbooks. Mosimann reported on scheduled speakers for upcoming NPP meetings, and received recommendations for potential future speakers. Mosimann scheduled booth attendance for the Mission Butterfly Festival on October 16<sup>th</sup>.

Look for our booth at the RGV Birding Festival in Harlingen. See page 6 for details.

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