



# The Sabal

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**The Flora of North America: Do, or Should We, Know What's Growing Here? II: Continued from last month**  
by Christina Mild

*Esenbeckia runyonii*. Limoncillo, Jopoy.  
(data on Limoncillo collected by Bill MacWhorter)

First U.S. specimen discovered by Robert Runyon of Brownsville in April 1929. Site was three miles northwest of Los Fresnos, on the banks of a Resaca. Four trees were found. Runyon collected specimens on July 8, 1929 and sent them to the U. S. National Herbarium. Seedling specimens were established in several locations in Cameron and Hidalgo counties and some still survive. The four original discovery trees were destroyed before 1970 and *Esenbeckia* was thought to be extinct in the wild in the U.S.

In 1984, Mike Heep and members of his family found a new colony of 14 trees on the banks of

Resaca del Rancho Viejo, about three miles from the Rio Grande. Those specimens grow in a dense jungle-like growth of cedar elm, colima and vine mimosa.

All remaining known Limoncillos grow in an area of no more than two acres. That population is currently protected within the Lower Rio Grande National Wildlife Refuge.

There are approximately 14 trees known to exist in the wild in the LRGV.

Fortunately, Chris Best and Mike Heep have grown Limoncillo from seed. Several specimens grow in cultivation at present. Public spaces where these can be seen include: Valley Nature Center and Frontera Audubon in Weslaco, Santa Ana NWR near Alamo and Ramsey Nature Park in Harlingen.

The glossy foliage of this tree is quite attractive. The plant is difficult to germinate and grow.

*Abutilon hulseanum*, Jann's Abutilon, Mauve  
In spring of 2004, Jann Miller of Harlingen discovered a large colony of



*Esenbeckia runyonii*. Limoncillo, Jopoy.

Specimens have grown well in Harlingen’s Ramsey Park. Full sun and sandy soil produce excellent growth, with masses of bloom and copious amounts of seed. This plant may become popular for landscaping; it is



*Yeatsia platystegia* Texas Shrimp Plant

afternoon-blooming mallows with gorgeous blooms and beautiful foliage. With the help of Ken King and Dr. Alfred Richardson, the plant was identified as *A. hulseanum*, which had not been encountered in Texas for quite some time. Seed and specimens of the plant were collected from one site, on private farmland, on the edge of an area which often floods.



*Abutilon hulseanum*, Jann’s Abutilon

exceedingly attractive.



Because there are large numbers of this plant growing in Florida, it has not appeared, to my knowledge, on any endangered or threatened lists. This means the

plant can be propagated without special permits, paperwork, or other bureaucratic entanglement



*Ayenia limitaris*, Texas Ayenia

The rediscovery of a wild population brought Scooter Cheatham and Lynn Marshall from Austin to photograph. These researchers have published two volumes of “Useful Wild Plants of Texas.” Photos of *A. hulseanum* will be added as an addendum to this excellent publication.

*Yeatsia platystegia* (formerly *Tetramerium platystegium*), Texas Shrimp Plant  
As is often the case, Ken King is the expert in terms of where this plant can be found and how it may be propagated. Because of his efforts (he searched for this species for about 10 years)

several specimens are now being cultivated in various LRGV locations.

Plants in cultivation teach us much more than was previously known about particular species, especially those which are uncommonly encountered or grow only in places remote from human habitation.

As of June 2002, botanist Bill Carr of Texas Nature Conservancy noted that *Yeatsia platystegia* was not known to occur on any protected tracts of land. Ken's work has changed that.

A lovely planting of Texas Shrimp Plant (Ken's choice of common names) blooms in Frontera Audubon's front island butterfly garden. At Ramsey Park, one plant grows in the Runyon Garden and another has been planted on a sandy ridge away from human traffic.

Ken tells me the plant is easy to propagate. He points out that it is the host plant of the Elf butterfly, which is rarely encountered in the U.S.

This is an important plant to seek when you venture out on fieldtrips. The range is rather widespread, though specimen numbers appear to be low.

*Yeatsia platystegia* is also found in Mexico in the states of Coahuila, Nuevo Leon and Tamaulipas.

Few records of collected U. S. specimens exist.

#### *Ayenia limitaris*, Texas *Ayenia*

The heart-shaped leaves of this moisture-loving plant lead many people to think it is a mallow. Close examination of the "fruit" are a key identifier, as the bristly-appearing fruit are quite different from those of the typical mallows.

Much of the information found on websites regarding this plant is incorrect. Most of us are unwilling to collect specimens with the necessary scientific vigor. Thus, several Cameron county populations are known only by local plant-buffs.

One colony of *Ayenia limitaris* occurs on property owned by the City of Harlingen at C. B. Wood Park. The city has signed an agreement to "protect" the plants. Another small population lies on a similar high terrace of Arroyo Colorado brush at James and Georgiana Matz' property in Rio Hondo.

Published sources indicate the species once occurred in a "subtropical riparian

woodland...found on the delta of the Rio Grande River." "Terraces" and "dense, relatively moist, subtropical riparian woodlands" are listed as places where the plant has historically occurred. Chris Best has propagated the plant at Santa Ana. Specimens grown in full sun and xeric conditions produced full shrubs more than four feet in height and diameter.

Wild populations are pitiful in appearance during extended drought. The plant responds quickly to rain, producing many blooms and fruit. In the wild, the plant is typically found in relatively clear understory of south Texas brush. It may be that this habitat is the only environment where human disturbance has not extinguished this species.

*Ayenia limitaris* was listed as endangered in 1994. This means that propagation of the plant is strictly controlled. In my opinion, this plant should be widely cultivated to improve the chance of survival. In this case, legal "protection" of the plant may well do more harm than good.

Christina Mild hold a MS degree in botany and writes weekly newspaper articles on LRGV native plants.

## Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge

The Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge, in Starr, Hidalgo, Cameron, and Willacy counties, extends along the Rio Grande from Falcon Dam to the Gulf of Mexico. It is anticipated to include 107,500 acres when complete. By 1989 40,000 acres was administered by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. The refuge was authorized by Congress in 1980 in an effort to restore and preserve animal and plant species in an area where more than 90 percent of natural vegetation had been cleared for agriculture or destroyed by rapid urbanization. Sanctuary is given to 115 species of wildlife and to some of the rarest animals and plants native to the United States. Endangered animals include the ocelot and jaguarundi. Exotic birds include the green jay and the chachalaca. Threatened plants include barreta and *Esenbeckia runyonii*.

The refuge lies 2½ degrees above the Tropic of Cancer and is in an area of contrasting climatic influences. Temperate and tropic climates meet, and warm, humid air from the Gulf of Mexico to the east meets dry air from the Chihuahuan Desert to the west. Annual rainfall within the refuge ranges from twenty-six inches on the Gulf shore to seventeen inches at the western refuge boundary. The mean annual temperature is 72.35 degrees. The elevation ranges from sea level to more than 300 feet. The upriver sections of the refuge lie in the Rio Grande valley, which ends near the Bordas Escarpment. From there to the Gulf of Mexico the refuge is in the Rio Grande delta. The Mississippi and Central flyways converge over the refuge, where more than 400 bird species congregate during migration.

Although the entire refuge is in the Tamaulipan Biotic Province, topological and climatic influences have been identified as eleven different biotic communities. The Chihuahuan Thorn Forest contains the largest remaining stand of subtropical thorn forest in the United States. The Ramadero has periodically wet arroyos that act as protected corridors from the Rio Grande to

adjacent highlands. Thick thorn forest offers safe passage to ocelots, jaguarundis, and other endangered species. The Upper Valley Flood Forest supports riverine species, including the Montezuma bald cypress. The Barretal, on the Bordas Escarpment, supports groves of barreta, a native citrus relative, and preserves fossil oyster beds. The Upland Thorn Scrub displays a dense growth of trees, shrubs, and cacti adapted to arid conditions. The Woodland Potholes and Basins contains ephemeral wetlands with many species of seasonal waterfowl. The Mid Delta Thorn Forest supports a jungle-like growth of trees and shrubs, including brasil, Texas ebony, and anacua. The Mid Valley Riparian Woodland is an area of lush growth and large trees, including cedar elm, Rio Grande ash, and Texas palm grove. Formerly watered by annual overflows of the Rio Grande, the area has been drying, with the loss of many trees, since the upriver construction of Falcon Dam. The Coastal Brushland Potholes are depressions of wind formation, rich in waterfowl after rainy seasons. The Sabal Palm Forest contains jungle-like stands of Sabal texana, the palm for which the Rio de las Palmas (Rio Grande) was named in 1519. *Justicia runyonii*, *Trixis radialis*, and *Passiflora filipes* carpet the forest floor. The Loma/Tidal Flats are tidal areas surrounding hills of eolian formation covered by a dense thicket of acacias, granjeno, and fiddlewood that protects many species of cacti and offers cover for ocelots, jaguarundi, and tortoises. Many animal species, including parrots and the large cats, have found sanctuary in this wildlife region on the United States side of the Rio Grande. Completion of the refuge will prevent the almost certain extinction of many species of animals and plants in the wild.

"LOWER RIO GRANDE VALLEY NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE." The Handbook of Texas Online.

<<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/LL/gkl25.html>> [Accessed Mon Dec 17 15:29:06 US/Central 2001 ].

## **Announcing the 2006 Valley Land Fund Wildlife Photo Contests**

Preparations are now underway for the Rio Grande Valley to host many of the world's most accomplished wildlife photographers in Spring 2006. Every even numbered year since 1994 photographers have traveled to the Rio Grande Valley to compete in the ultimate wildlife photographic challenge- The Valley Land Fund's Wildlife Photo Contests. For 2006 contest redesign will bring a new group of photographers that will compete from April 1 to June 30, 2006 for a prize pool of \$130,000. Registration is now open and will continue through January 31, 2006. The South Texas Shootout and the Small Tract Competition pair landowners, who provide wildlife habitat with photographers skilled at capturing often reclusive animals in beautiful images. Landowners in the eight South Texas counties (Brooks, Cameron, Hidalgo, Jim Hogg, Kenedy, Starr, Willacy and Zapata) are eligible to compete.

The Small Tract Competition is open to properties ranging in size from a traditional city lot, up to 100 acres. The "Shootout" encompasses the larger ranch properties. There is also a Youth Photo Contest, with two age divisions, where children 10 to 19 years old compete. Youth participants are not restricted to one parcel of land and may photograph anywhere in the eight counties that they have access to, except zoos.

Interested photographers and landowners should register today. Call 956-686-6429 or visit us online at. [www.ValleyLandFund.com](http://www.ValleyLandFund.com).



2004 Small Tract Competition  
Best of Contest Winner Luciano  
Guerra, Landowner/Photographer

Native Plant Rescue: **The Valley Nature Center** will rescue native plants about to be destroyed by construction companies, developers, or no longer wanted by home owners. Call 956-969-2475.

**Exclusively Native plant sources:**

Benito Trevino, Landscaper/Grower, Rio Grande City 956-487-4626  
Valley Nature Center – Native Plants, Weslaco 956-969-2475  
Mother Nature’s Creations, Harlingen 956-428-4897  
Heep’s Nursery, Harlingen 956-457-6834



**Nature Happenings in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas**

**Texas State Park Tours/ World Birding Center, Mission, Texas—** Lomitas Ranch Tours and other natural area tours 7:30 a.m. – 5 p.m. every Tuesday and Friday from Benson Rio Grande State Park/World Birding Center in Mission, TX. Outings focus on native plants and their uses. Fees: \$25 per person: reservations required - call 956-519-6448. Or go to [www.worldbirdingcenter.org](http://www.worldbirdingcenter.org)

**Sabal Palm Grove Sanctuary—** Native plant presentation and tour by Joseph Krause – every weekday at 10 a.m. Pre-registration required – call 956-541-8034.

**Laguna Atascosa NWR—** Nature BIKE RIDES on Saturdays from 8 a.m. - 10:30 a.m. and Nature WALKS, Sundays from 8 a.m. - 10 a.m. Call for details: 956-748-3607.

The Sabal is the Newsletter of the Native Plant Project and conveys information on the native habitats, 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 @ 956-425-4005, or g\_lester48@msn.com. See *The Sabal* and our 5 handbooks on the website:

[www.nativeplantproject.org](http://www.nativeplantproject.org)

**Native Plant Project Board of Directors:**

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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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Comments/ suggestions/ speaker recommendations should be sent to: Native Plant Project, P.O. Box 2742, San Juan, TX 78589 or contact G. Lester @ 956-425-4005 or g\_lester48@msn.com

Native Plant Project Meetings – November 22, 2005. **Board meeting** at 6:30 pm; **General meeting** at 7:30pm featuring: Christina Mild, who will give an entertaining talk called “Forsaken, Dusty, Treasures of Botanical Diversity”. The subject will be on books (mostly old) that have been written about our native plants.

**Board and General Meeting 2005 (2006):**

January 25 (24)      September 27 (26)  
February 22 (28)    October 25 (24)  
March 22 (28)      November 22 (28)  
May 24 (23)

**Board Meeting Only 2005 (2006):**

April 26 (25)    December 27 (26)

Summary of the Minutes of the NPP Board Meeting on Oct. 25, 2005. The NPP booth at the Texas Butterfly Festival was very successful. We sold 307 plants and 78 handbooks. Work is progressing on preparing PowerPoint presentations based on each handbook.

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