



The Sabal

February 2014

Volume 31, number 2

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Page number references for each species shown in the Sabal refer to: "Plants of Deep South Texas," (PDST).

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February 2014 Mtg., Native Plant Project:

Tues., Feb. 25th, 2014: at 7:30pm

"Native Cacti of Deep South Texas

The Native Plant Project (NPP) proudly presents Ken King, speaking on "Native Cacti of Deep South Texas." King is one of the RGV's foremost naturalists, serving on the board of Valley Nature Center and is President of NPP. He has cultivated many of the species which he will talk about and is probably our foremost expert on local cacti. He is also co-author, with Dr. Al Richardson, of the recently published comprehensive guide to "Plants of Deep South Texas."

The meeting is held at:

Valley Nature Center, 301 S. Border,
(in Gibson Park), Weslaco. 956-969-2475



Nopalea cochenillifera, forming fruit in February in a local yard. Blooming occurs during winter (Sep.-Mar.). The pads of *Nopalea cochenillifera* are used as food, fodder, and poultices, and for rearing cochineal insects to obtain a red dye (once a major industry). This species may have been selected for spinelessness in Mexico ... to ease the culturing and collection of cochineal scale insects for red dye. (Data from [www.eFloras.org], "**Flora of North America.**")

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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Freeze Damage—January-February 2014

Flowers and fruit are much more exciting topics, but the potential for freeze damage has been a frequent occurrence this “winter.”

Photographing in Harlingen’s Ramsey Park on Feb. 13th, I noticed just a few tree species with apparent freeze damage to leaves on the tallest limbs. Of the 28 or so native tree species living there, only Tepeguaje and Soapberry demonstrated such damage, and it was minimal.

Several contributors sent observations of cold or freeze damage.

Mike Heep: “The cold has been rough on White Plumbago. Nothing else really hurt. The lowest temp here was 31 degrees, I think. Not cold enough to hurt most natives.”

Heep’s comments may illustrate the relative damage to plants with large root systems in the ground, versus those in pots. At Ramsey and in the Mild’s yard, plumbago has developed an attractive reddish coloration to the leaves, but it has continually bloomed through the winter.

Al Richardson reports: “I haven’t seen any significant damage. Some limbs broke from ice-encrusted trees.”

In Ramsey, Tenaza and Mexican Caesalpinia had large and/or extensive broken limbs. It was impossible to say whether breakage was caused by the weight of ice or the almost ever-present wind in deep south Texas and the tendency of those fast-growing species to suffer broken limbs.

Diann Ballesteros commented: “I had ice last Wednesday, but I can detect no damage to anything. I know the croton near the front door had ice on it. Today I see it is blooming.”

“Not even the Guamuchils were damaged. I know they can be killed by the cold. I guess the ice kept them from getting too cold.”

During prolonged cold spells, *Lantana velutina* freezes to the ground, but this year it has been a continual winter bloomer.

Mexican Caesalpinia has been gorgeous!



On left *Plumbago scandens*, PDST p 352, and right, Cortez’ Croton, PDST p 315, develop reddish foliage in response to environmental extremes, including very cold weather.



On left *Lantana velutina*, PDST p 417, and other winter bloomers, are important pollen sources for bees.

Right: *Caesalpinia mexicana*, with broken limbs. Below: *Caesalpinia* in bloom. This tree species has been a star bloomer in Jan.-Feb. 2014. PDST p 232. (Ramsey Pk. photos)





fields which have been plowed and planted. Farmers aren't enthusiastic about sunflowers in their fields, as the plants use a lot of water.

Mirasol is easily established by dropping

Winter Fruits (Seeds, etc.) —

When we think of food for birds, we probably don't immediately think of leaf and bloom buds. Actually, parrots enjoy these, especially the buds of Sugar Hackberry, PDST p 408, *Celtis laevigata*, above.

mature seedheads on barren ground. The black-backed lesser goldfinch is especially fond of sunflower seeds. Sunflowers are also an important source of pollen for overwintering bees.

In warmer weather, sunflowers attract a wide range of butterflies.



Above, Southern Pepperweed, PDST p 153, *Lepidium austrinum*, is often found in waste places and amongst wildflowers. The round seedpods (siliques) which occur below the flowering head are edible. They add a bit of peppery flavor to salads.

“Leaves and fruits are eaten by cattle and white-tailed deer, whereas the seeds are eaten by several species of birds.” **Broad-Leaved Herbaceous Plants of South Texas,** 1999, Everitt, Drawe & Lonard, p 74-75.

These are just a few examples of natives which produce winter food for wildlife.

One of the most widespread and available winter flower and fruit producers is Mirasol, the common sunflower (PDST p 105), *Helianthus annuus*. Fallow farm fields are often brilliant with these blooms. Individual plants and small colonies generally persist on the edges of

Winter Flowers—Nectar & Pollen Producers

In cultivated yards where native species are grown, plants from many different families produce blooms during winter.

Frank Wiseman reported *Yucca treculeana* in full bloom within a bank's rock garden landscaping. Frank also reported Pink Mint (below), Spring Blue Mistflower (right) and Bladderpod PDST p 155.



Pink
Mint



Spring
Mistflower

Al Richardson reports *Wedelia hispida*, *Simsia calva* and wild Poinsettia blooming throughout winter in his Brownsville yard.

Diann Ballesteros reports a wide range of winter bloomers, including: "Buttercup (photo p 7), Tropical Sage, White Plumbago, TX Lantana, Mexican Trixis, Carlowrightia, and Sweet Stem. The Sweet Stem looks healthy and the Trixis is full of blooms. I have a few berries on the Pigeon berry."

Selenia grandis (photo mid-right) (PDST p 157) is a Texas endemic species which sometimes appears locally. Mike Heep reports: "They are blooming in our front yard and along the fields south of the Arroyo on Dilworth Rd. They are probably out along FM 510 east of the County Highway Barn."

C. Mild photographed *Selenia* near St. Paul's school in Harlingen (probably an hour before they were mown down). Their sweet aroma along 13th St. in Harlingen was mixed with scents of Bladderpod. Lower right: *Sanvitalia occymoides*, PDST p 122, also bloomed in that spot, with masses of Dakota Vervain.



Plant Families Which Bloom in Winter-Spring:

Dr. Al Richardson reminds us of several plant families which bloom during cool weather.

These include the “Umbels,” parsley relatives, Family **Apiaceae**, and Family **Brassicaceae**, the mustard and cabbage relatives.

Dr. Richardson provided photos of early bloomers from these families which were not included in **Plants of Deep South Texas**. *Photos on pages 5-6 are by Dr. Al Richardson and many of the comments on each plant come from the advance draft of his and Ken King’s “next book.”*

Family Apiaceae

Top: *Ammoselinum butleri* (peduncle absent or very short). Short lived branching annual about 2” high.

Middle: *Ammoselinum popei*. Up to 14” tall. Slender stems, compound leaves. Corky fruit with longitudinal ribs, separating into two equal halves when dry.

Lower Right: *Cyclospermum leptophyllum*, Marsh Parsley. Like the *Ammoselinum* species shown here, this wild parsley has small white flowers, with obvious fruits forming just below each bloom. Foliage is linear. Introduced from tropical America, it is fairly widespread, especially along the southern Gulf Coast. Unarmed and probably eaten by browsers.

Below: *Erngium prostratum* is in the same Family, but has a beautifully-menacing appearance. This species is probably prickly to eat. Blooms are present in spring through fall. Hidalgo and Willacy Counties.



Family Brassicaceae

Below: *Sinapsis arvensis*, *Field Mustard* was photographed on the UT campus in Brownsville. Like many mustard relatives, this species has yellow flowers. Note the elongated seed capsule (up to 1.5" long) protruding from the bloom center. The foliage is similar in color and surface to that of the common cabbage.

“Recent studies show (this species) was present in the United States 8,000 years ago, then disappeared. It was re-introduced by European settlers about 400 years ago (“Flora of North America,” (7), 2010). Preferring a colder climate, Field Mustard is a pest in fields farther north, causing crop losses. It also is a host for viruses and fungi that attack crops in the same family (Brassicaceae).”



Promoting Wildflowers of All Kinds -

Many different measures have been employed to promote wildflowers at Ramsey Park in Harlingen.

Because most wildflowers outside nature parks are mown down before seed is mature, most species face the danger of disappearance.

Ladybird Johnson, in the great beyond, is probably singing “when will they ever learn...when will they ever learn?”

Below are some of the measures which have helped Ramsey volunteers to spread wildflowers to new places and to ensure their spread and continuance.

- Control of competitive, invasive grasses (pulling them up, killing them with RoundUp).
- Addition of native grasses by transplanting from construction sites and some seed sowing. (Native grasses are better-behaved; they share growing space more readily with wildflowers.)
- Wildflower seed collection from the wild and subsequent planting in protected areas.
- Digging wildflowers from areas where they will likely be mown before seed matures (roadsides, easements, alleys, public spaces).
- Providing specimens and/or seed to Native Nurserymen (see pg. 7).

What can you do in your own yard, or promote by speaking to groundskeepers?

- Raise the lawnmower blade.
- Avoid mowing wildflowers in bloom until seed has matured.
- Collect seed and plant in protected areas.
- Learn to recognize wildflower seedlings.

LRGV Native Plant Sources

Heep's Nursery (& Landscaping)

(Mike Heep)
1714 S. Palm Court Drive
Harlingen, TX 78552
(956) 423-4513 * By appt. only

Valley Nature Center

301 S. Border Ave.
Weslaco, TX 78596
(956) 969-2475
<info@valleynaturecenter.org>
[www.valleynaturecenter.org]

Perez Ranch Nursery

(Betty Perez & Susan Thompson)
12 miles north of La Joya, TX
(956) 580-8915
<PerezRanchNatives@gmail.com>

Mother Nature's Creations

(Billy & Sue Snider)
2822 Nueces, Harlingen, TX 78550
Nursery open by appointment:
(956) 428-4897

NABA Butterfly Park
Old Military Hwy & Butterfly Pk Dr
Mission, TX 78552
(956) 583-9009

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

Landscaper using Natives:

Williams Wildscapes, Inc.
(Allen Williams)
750 W Sam Houston
Pharr, TX 78577
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[www.williamswildscapes.com]

Sponsors

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NPP Board & General Meetings held at Valley Nature Center (ABOVE)

(Fourth Tuesday each month)

Board Meetings at 6:30pm. — Speaker at 7:30pm.

2014 Meeting Dates:

Mar. 25th, 2014– Wildflowers

Apr. 22nd, 2014

May 27th, 2014



Left: Buttercup, Pink Evening Primrose, PDST p 341, is prevalent during March. In yards where the mowing blade is set high, these wildflowers will persist.

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 Feb. meeting/speaker on:

Tues., Feb. 25th, 2014: at 7:30pm

"Native Cacti of Deep South Texas"

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presented at:

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Above: Ken King's comments about this species: "*Nopalea cochenillifera*, an exotic cactus species from the New World tropics. The spineless form (cultivar) is widely grown for eating. The flowers never open widely as in *Opuntia* and are probably specialized for hummingbird pollination. My tortoises love it!"

This month's SABAL topic: "February Flowers, Fruit & Freeze Damage"