

Stinging Cevallia

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Stinging cevallia is a plant specialist. Think of West Texas, think of the counties bordering the entire Rio Grande River and scattered western Hill Country and Rolling Plains counties and you get the feel of where this plant calls home. This native, perennial forb will always be found where the climate is dryer and the soils are rocky or gravelly. Only once, in Throckmorton County in the Rolling Plains of Northwest Texas in 2018 have I seen it growing on clay loam soils. It likes the harsh life where few people dare to tread. If you go in search of this forb, look for the rocky outcrops where few grasses and other forbs grow, and you might bump into stinging cevallia. We can learn a lot about a plant by its name and stinging cevallia is not at all a misleading name. Perhaps the reason it is found in the wide, open wild spaces is because of the nasty sting which surprises anyone bumping into the plant.

Stinging cevallia, *Cevallia sinuata* is also called stinging serpent and stingleaf. It grows during the warm season from a semi-woody base and is a much-branched forb growing 12 to 24 inches tall and 24 to 30 inches across. The stems have a whitish appearance with a shedding surface. When first seen this plant will have an overall grayish color from the leaves combined with the prominent white stems. The leaves are alternate in growth, attach directly to the stems and are lobed with wavy margins. The leaves reach a length of 1 to 2½ inches and up to an inch in width. Leaves and stems are covered with short white hairs as well as longer stinging hairs that resemble “glass trees” when carefully viewed with a magnifier. The long hairs contain formic acid and can produce stinging and a rash upon contact. The sting will eventually fade although a good ranch remedy to ease the pain is to dab the affected areas with bleach. Flowers are several in rounded clusters, terminal in growth on the stems, each flower ½ to ⅝ inch in diameter, with five petals and sepals. Flower heads are very hairy appearing feather-like with flower stalks up to 4 inches in length.

Stinging cevallia is not eaten by livestock or deer due to the formic acid in the stinging hairs. Cevallia has low value to game and songbirds, but pollinators are attracted to the many flowers. All native plants have value, though it may not be for use by livestock, game animals or songbirds. This persistent perennial is found on dry rocky or gravelly soils because it is a strong competitor for water and sunlight in an otherwise inhospitable site for most plants. Looking at the rocky outcrops where cevallia is found, management by man will not show a great change in the plant community growing there due to the natural geology of the soils making up those outcrops. But proper grazing management will improve the remaining acres of your property. All land owners should always think in terms of being good stewards of the land. We should appreciate the soil, the plants, and the species that depend upon those plants from the earthworms to the tiniest pollinators to the largest herbivores. I have to admit a unique fondness when seeing stinging cevallia out on the land. There is comfort in finding a plant where it is expected to be. Just mind your manners and keep your distance from this stinging serpent.

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Photo captions:

1 Stinging cevallia in its natural environment and in all its glory.



2 Flowers open in the morning and may be yellow to orange to reddish in color.



3 Each fertilized flower results in a single seed being produced in a hollow, feathery appendage.



4 European honeybees and many other pollinators visit the numerous flowers to collect nectar and pollen.



5 Previous years decadent stems reveal the eventual size of stinging cevallia growing in August.



6 Credit must be given to plants tenacious enough to grow and flourish in a rock ranch road near the Clear Fork of the Brazos River.



7 Gulf fritillary nectaring on stinging cevallia in mid-summer in the Rolling Plains of Texas.

