

Tall-bread Scurfpea

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Scurfpeas are a common perennial forb in the legume family of plants. Within Texas there are 10 recognized individual species and then 6 varieties listed within these species. One or more species of scurfpea can be found in all 10 vegetational areas of Texas though infrequently found in the Trans Pecos area. A species examined here, Tall-bread scurfpea, *Pedimelum cuspidatum*, is found across the Blackland Prairie, Cross Timbers, Rolling Plains and Edwards Plateau. Common names among the species of scurfpea include Indian turnip, Turnip-root scurfpea and Breadroot hint that beneath the ground lies large tuberous roots. These swollen roots are edible and were dug up and used by the Native Americans for food. The roots can be eaten raw, boiled or dried for later use. The dried roots were pounded into a flour-like consistency and baked on a hot rock to have bread.

Therein lies the tie these plants have to the present, these tubers are still edible and are being dug and eaten by feral hogs. Once when walking in a pasture with a landowner we came upon a level area that had recently been uprooted by hogs and lying upon the fresh turned soil were the tops of scurfpea, but not a single tuber remained. The hogs having eaten only the roots and leaving the leafy tops to waste away. The ground was uprooted to a depth of about one foot and small bomb craters about 4-6 feet in diameter were scattered wherever a scurfpea had been growing. This was before cell phones were common and I did not have a camera on hand to record the damage so I missed that photo opportunity.

Sometimes growing erect, but normally with stems lying down and averaging 1 to 2 ½ feet in length. The stems trail along the ground, then begin rising at the tips, 6 to 10 inches above the ground. The flowers will come from dense clusters either from the axils of the stem and leaf or from the terminal end of the stems. These flower clusters are up to 5 inches in length and 1 ½ inches across, with pea-shaped petals varying from light-blue to deep-blue to violet in color. The leaves are a good identification clue when you see young scurfpea plants as the leaves radiate outward being palmately divided into usually five leaflets, although the range may be from three to five. Leaflets are rounded on the ends in shape with a definite fold-line down the midrib. The leaves and stems are gland dotted which provides another identification clue. Fruits is a one-seeded thin papery pod.

The leaves are eaten by deer and occasionally by livestock, and are considered to have good forage value for deer. It is a good seed-producer for game and song-birds. One source reported the plant as being poisonous to livestock, but this has not been confirmed. Now it seems that the greatest use of this plant is by feral hogs using the roots as food. As you can imagine this causes much land damage and the total loss of the individual plants. While wildlife or livestock might consume the leaves and stems the plant will survive to grow again, but not after being uprooted by feral hogs. Pollinator species frequently visit the many flowers of scurf-pea each year. The flowers mature over several weeks providing nectar and pollen for many pollinators.

This plant is found on clayey, rocky or sandy prairies and hillsides in open sun and lightwoods. Rotational grazing will allow the plants to produce seeds and remain healthy. While walking across your pastures or hunting lease this summer keep an eye open for scurfpea plants, this might provide a snack to impress family and friends.

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Photo captions:

1 Mid-April growth of new plants producing early flowers and stem elongation.



2 The stems of scurfpea plants radiate outward from the tough roots lying underneath the soil surface.



3 Scurfpea stems run along the ground unless pushed upwards by grasses or other vegetation.



4 Scurfpea flowers and stem tip growth by the first of May.



5 Close-up of the flower heads of Tall-bread scurfpea showing the bonnet-shaped flowers.



6 Scurfpea seeds form in these capsules as the stems and flowers mature.

