



## Rio Delta Wild

Christina Mild

### Flora Facts:

Scientific Name: *Celosia nitida*

Common Names: Slender Celosia, Albahaca

Family: Amaranthaceae (Amaranth)

### **Albahaca's Foliage Is Easily Confused With Pigeonberry**

Native plant grower Mike Heep pointed out *Celosia nitida* to me years ago. "I think this is a good little plant for birds," he noted. I've been trying to learn and remember the name for years. I learned a name for it, but wasn't even close to being right.

It takes a while to notice this rather

inconspicuous plant, and even longer to distinguish it from species with similar foliage.

One encounters this slender relative of showy Cocks Comb in many different local settings: shaded places on the *lomas*, Resaca edges, sunny trailsides in the Harlingen Thicket and at Palo Alto Battlefield, and in many of the most shaded sections of dense brush.

In the sunniest areas, and wherever plants are drought-stressed, *Celosia* leaves exhibit the red coloration we often associate with fall foliage. Pigeonberry leaves show this same coloration and are similar in other features. This red coloration provides a nice contrast, especially at times when colorful blossoms are not abundant in the brush.

"Small birds hang out near the *Celosia nitida* in my greenhouse," Heep tells me. "There's some circumstantial evidence that birds are eating it, as well." Heep continues. "The plant is widespread locally, and the seeds would not have blown to so many places. Something is eating the seeds and carrying them around."

Most of the common names for the plant add much confusion. *Albahaca*, for instance, also refers to basil, which is remarkably different. West Indian Cocks Comb is wildly confusing, as one would imagine something like the decorative species of *Celosia* sold in nurseries.

*Celosia nitida*, though attractive, is far from conspicuous.

Several websites list the inconspicuous plant as larval food source of the Aztec Scallopwing butterfly, *Staphylus azteca*. This butterfly has not yet been reported in Texas, but the growth of butterfly watching as a hobby brings new local sightings of different species everyday.

A virtual herbarium website maintained by the state of Florida lists the distribution of *Celosia nitida* as: Florida, Texas, West Indies, Central and South America. It is considered native to Florida and is listed by the state as endangered.

It is, of course, also listed on another website as a weed, though no supporting information of any kind is included by the official weed listing group.

Correll and Johnston describe the distribution in Texas as: “extending through the Rio Grande Plains into the Edwards Plateau.” They include sandy soils and gravelly hills as likely places to encounter the plant. (*Manual of the Vascular Plants of Texas*, 1979.)

*Celosia nitida* was originally reported in 1791 with a type specimen collected in Texas.

Another botanist reported the plant in 1849, conferring the name *Celosia texana*. Despite botanists’ long familiarity with the plant’s existence, one finds few photos of it anywhere. It isn’t the easiest thing to photograph. I resorted to placing my woven pith helmet underneath to focus on the plant’s distinguishing features.

Mike Heep finds *Celosia nitida* very attractive when it’s nicely fertilized and watered. He’s been planning to test it out as a groundcover. “It’s tough as nails,” he tells me, though I’ve always found it soft and smooth to touch. He was, of course, describing an ability to survive drought, relying on an underground tuber.

Correll & Johnston point out a perennial nature, long woody taproot, slender erect or vinelike stems, and alternate leaves.

*Celosia nitida* has not become a popular landscaping plant, though Bob Stelzer continues to stock it among his selection of natives at Wild Bird Center store at 2<sup>nd</sup> St. and Jackson in Harlingen. People are planting it now and then. Thus, we’ll begin to learn much more about which birds prefer the seed and whether butterflies will lay their eggs upon it.

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