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RIO DELTA WILD

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Cure-for-all blooms at Valley Nature Center in Weslaco.



FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Pluchea carolinensis*

Common Names: Cure-for-all

Family: Asteraceae

An Uncommon Cure-For-All

Cure-for-all is the common name for the soft-leaved shrub *Pluchea carolinensis*. Surely the name is too grand to be true.

During the last weeks of March, *Pluchea carolinensis* bloomed at Valley Nature Center in Weslaco. The plant has recently been identified by Ann Vacek of the Native Plant Project. Ann's extensive research on the plant was passed on to me by Ken King.

King is responsible for many of the beautiful and unusual plants one finds in Weslaco at the nature center. He also volunteers at Weslaco's Frontera Thicket, which means that plant diversity is blossoming there, as well.

Pluchea carolinensis was first noticed growing locally by Richard Lehman. Unsure of the plant's identity, he pointed it out to King, who typically recognizes more plants and animals than anyone I've ever met.

Large fuzzy leaves are unusual in this area, and Cure-for-all isn't included in any local field guides. Ken was unfamiliar with the plant, but cuttings were taken in an attempt at propagation.

The location where the plant was found is south of Santa Maria on an irrigation canal at the water plant. Lehman's notice of it is a bit remarkable, as it was growing amongst Potato Tree and Buddleja, with similar large and fuzzy leaves.

Until the plant began to bloom, it was impossible to know what it might be, and waiting for it to bloom required some patience.

"The blooming period of this *Pluchea* is very short and it's blooming right now." Ken told me recently. I had expressed interest in writing about it. Several friends who've seen it at the Nature Center have been asking me what it is.

When I called the nature center's Education Director, Andrea Garcia, she was kind enough to take photos. Thus, my readers are able to see these infrequently-appearing blooms.

To those familiar with Marsh Fleabane, the close relationship with this *Pluchea* will be readily apparent. The blooms are quite similar.

Even with a pile of research data, we can't be sure that *Pluchea carolinensis* is native to our locale. It does occur here, in the wild, in several locations.

Max Pons reports that it occurs close to the river at the Nature Conservancy's Southmost Preserve in Brownsville.

As usual, several different names have been given to the same plant, including *Pluchea odorata* and *Conyza carolinensis*. It's possible that the plant's occurrence in Texas has been recorded in the past under a different name.

In any case, the plant is useful and attractive. From what I read about it, I believe it's unlikely to become a locally-invasive pest.

Research Forester John K. Francis, in cooperation with the University of Puerto Rico, has posted an excellent summary about the plant on the web. It can be found by searching on the botanical name. The following data comes from his published article.

Cure-for-all grows up to three meters in height, with basal stem diameter up to six centimeters. Stem wood is moderately soft and brittle. Both leaf surfaces are fuzzy, with lower surfaces especially protected by pubescence. The flowering structure is typically pink, varying from purple to white. Many tightly-compressed flower heads are clustered together, with each rounded "bloom" composed of over 500 flowers each.

Natural distribution of the plant includes Florida, Bermuda, the Bahamas, West Indies, Mexico, Central America and several countries in South America.

In some tropical areas, the naturalized plant has become a pest.

Cure-for-all is adapted to a wide variety of soils. It tolerates excessively-well to poorly-drained soils, acid, alkali, salt, salt spray and compaction.

Unlike closely-related Marsh Fleabane, this *Pluchea* survives very dry places.

Several factors should limit the spread of Cure-for-all in south Texas. It cannot endure overhead shade or severe competition from brush or grass.

Reproduction is by wind-dispersed seed. Wet, bare soil is probably required for germination.

In Puerto Rico, Cure-for-all lives for 2-4 years before dying. Sprouts grow 1.5 meters the first year.

Francis' summary is this: "Cure-for-all has an excellent ability to colonize and stabilize disturbed areas and act as a nurse crop for later-successional species. ...it probably provides a source of nectar and pollen for honeybees and other insects." In addition, he lists a wide range of ailments for which the plant provides relief.

Cure-for-all might be of particular use if your pet rat suffers from pain or inflammation. Research studies conducted in 2002 demonstrated analgesic and anti-inflammatory effects on rats.

My personal research, exposure to the blooms, indicates that humans may suffer respiratory allergic symptoms to this "Cure-for-all."

Pluchea carolinensis is an attractive plant, even when it's not in bloom. The brown fluffy mass produced by mature blooms is a unique spectacle. Although I doubt that it truly is a Cure-for-all, this plant is worth notice, no matter the season.

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