



The Sabal

www.nativeplantproject.org

Growing Annual Wildflowers from Seed in Southernmost Texas

—by *Christina Mild* [www.riodeltawild.com]

For a number of years, volunteers at Ramsey Nature Park in Harlingen have tried with mixed success to add annual wildflower diversity where trees and shrubs were the primary focus. Here are a few species most anyone can grow, and a few boastful achievements.

Cowpen daisy (*Verbesina encelioides*) – Spring and fall blooming. An excellent choice for very poor soils and full sun, as this colony-forming plant survives such conditions. Cowpen daisies are tall enough to outgrow some competing grasses. They are thought to produce growth-inhibiting substances which affect other plants in the vicinity. For this reason, they may be useful in combating the return of guinea grass infestations. Excellent butterfly nectar is

produced and seeds are eaten by many species of birds. Once established, colonies will return year after year if competing grasses and shrubs are controlled. Seed can be gathered on many roadsides, as the plant is often abundant. This is the first wildflower I grew successfully from wild-collected and wild-sown seed. This species is classified as an agricultural weed.

Mexican Hat (*Ratibida columnaris*) – Blooms spring, summer and fall. In many idle farm fields around McAllen, I was able to collect lots of seed for this species, and it germinated fairly well from broadcast seed. Because it commonly grows less than 3 ft tall, guinea grass populations quickly overtake it. Even young plants have very deep taproots, making this a difficult species to transplant, and probably giving the plant drought



Seed [www.seedsources.com] in Junction, TX. Two of the eleven species from that mix grew especially well, have persisted, and have been spread to many areas of the park by wild-sown seed and transplanted specimens. The best survivors: Tropical Sage and Huisache Daisy.

Tropical Sage, Mirto (*Salvia coccinea*) – Tolerates shade or sun, well-drained or poorly drained soils, and even clay. Blooms whenever water

resistance. Once established, colonies will form and reseed year after year.

Native American Seed. In fall of 2001, Arroyo Colorado Audubon Society sold a wildflower seed mix formulated for the lower Rio Grande Valley. Seed was obtained from Native American



is available, even at rather low growing temperatures. I photographed these in bloom when Harlingen received a Christmas Eve blanket of snow in 2004. You'll find Tropical Sage scattered throughout valley brush (but only in the few places where guinea or buffle grasses haven't invaded). The tiny seeds attract small seed-eaters such as our black-backed Lesser Goldfinch. Butterflies and hummingbirds nectar at the tiny red blossoms.

RGV Texas Master Naturalist volunteers have also transplanted many specimens from construction sites in Harlingen and Brownsville, as well as from pathways within Ramsey Park. Plants become unsightly in dry weather and perform best if trimmed back. By scattering the trimmed lanky growth on barren soil, we've been able to establish new colonies in remote areas, without pretreatment of the soil or irrigation. (Transplants are available from native plant growers.)

Huisache Daisy (*Amblyolepis setigera*) – Earliest blooms occur in February. Blooming season continues through March and April. Blooming is greatly prolonged by irrigation. The light green foliage of Huisache Daisy is covered by long, soft hairs. Plants tend to be recumbent and form colonies which reseed easily. I rarely find this plant in the wild, but it certainly performs well in Ramsey Park and grows easily from wild-sown seed. The plant supposedly has the sweet odor of freshly-mown hay, indicating the presence of coumarin, an anticoagulant utilized as rat poison. Perhaps this is why Huisache Daisy persists and has not been eaten by rabbits and other foragers. It could be toxic if ingested by humans. Seedling rosettes, grey-green in color, become evident in November and December.

Basket Flower (*Centaurea Americana*) - Diann Ballesteros established this tall (4-5') bloomer in Ramsey Park from collected seed. It's one of very few native wildflowers which grow tall enough to outpace guinea grass along the Arroyo's banks, but it's usually mown to oblivion shortly after blooming begins. Richard Lehman established colonies at Frontera Audubon's Thicket in Weslaco around 1998 and some plants have reseeded annually. The entry trails to Sabal Palm Sanctuary in Brownsville are often lined with these beautiful blooms in spring and summer.

Texas Thistle (*Cirsium texanum*) is similar in appearance to the Basket Flower, very attractive

to seed-eaters and nectarers, and easily grown from seed, preferably in full sun. Roadside specimens are plentiful in some areas. Protective gloves are useful in collecting the seed and body protection is essential in managing the very tall and bristly plants. Your efforts with this menacing plant will be rewarded by visiting goldfinches and colorful Swallowtail butterflies.

Sclerocarpus vialis – Found in western reaches of the valley, this gorgeous bloomer is a butterfly favorite in mid-summer's heat. Diann Ballesteros established this beauty in Ramsey Park from seed collected at Frontera Audubon. Ken King introduced this annual wildflower into cultivation in Frontera's butterfly garden and he is the local authority on it. As with so many native species, plants found in the wild are often scraggly and unimpressive. Grown in fertile soil and irrigated, these plants are robust, tall and beautiful.

Crucita (*Eupatorium odoratum*) – This is probably the most widespread wildflower in Ramsey Park. It does not usually bloom during spring, but many plants still bear viable seed, which can be collected now and planted for fall blooms. Seed is planted on the surface, rather than buried. Once plants have produced mature seed, it's a good idea to trim foliage back. At Ramsey Park, we've started large new colonies of *Crucita* by spreading seed-bearing cuttings on clearings, and left Mother Nature to take charge. Once sizable seedlings appear, we pull out any guinea grass which would interfere with future growth.

Other species of *Eupatorium* provide blooms of different colors or during different seasons. The spring-blooming *Eupatorium azureum* is an excellent spring nectar plant. We've been able to transplant rescued specimens from Alton Gloor Woods in Brownsville. Native plant growers often carry this plant. In my yard, this has been a perennial.

Prickly Poppy (*Argemone sanguinea*) – This is another wildflower which may produce growth inhibiting substances, affecting surrounding plants. Prickly poppies are beautiful. They tolerate poor soils and withstand drought. The foliage is starkly beautiful. A few specimens will bloom as early or late as December, and during spring they're glorious. Doves are especially



Huisache Daisy



Sclerocarpus vialis

masses adorned Ramsey's upper mown trail throughout spring. Then masses of dried, prickly vegetation remained: an unsightly spectacle. After many thwarted efforts to remove the dried up plants, I finally discovered a good tactic: wearing

fond of the seeds, but these may produce toxic reactions if consumed by humans or livestock. You'll need body protection to collect the seeds and even more body protection to work anywhere near the living or dead plant. I was much too successful in growing these from seed last spring, although the seed may have been lying in the ground for several years prior. Gorgeous blooming



Basket flower

the thickest oven mitts I could find, with an inner glove for more protection. Dollar Tree stores had a good selection of thick oven mitts, some with long cuffs and some with a silver coating. These provided protection from all but the very longest prickles, and I came away from the clean-up job with major exhaustion and only minor puncture wounds. Sometimes beauty carries a heavy price.

Mirasol, Annual Sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*) These may become taller than 6' and will need plenty of growing space in full sun. Once established, they'll return year after year, attracting entire families of the black-backed Lesser Goldfinch and other seed-eating birds, as well as many nectaring butterflies.

I don't bother removing individual seeds from these prickly-haired plants. It's easier to cut entire seed heads, wearing protection for your hands. The seed heads can be cast in the vicinity where you'd like the plants to grow. Birds will appear to scatter the seed around for you. I've also transplanted small plants from edges of farm fields, where they're considered a water-wasting weed.

In conclusion: there are many species of wildflowers native to this area, and many are quickly disappearing. It is best to leave wildflowers and their seed in place if the growing area is not threatened by encroaching humans and exotic plant species. Trespassing is a serious crime and can be prosecuted. It's wise to ask permission before collecting seed or digging plants.

Most of the seeds I've mentioned in this article can be ordered from Native American Seed, the most reputable provider of seed well-suited to this area. Several species of these and other wildflowers can also be obtained by the native plant nurseries which support this newsletter.

Upcoming guided tours of spring-blooming natives: On the first Thursday of March and April, RGV TX Master Naturalists will conduct

9 a.m. tours of Ramsey Park. Wildflowers and other blooms are the subjects of most tours. For more information and to reserve a spot, contact Frank Wiseman at 364-1410. A map of the park and directions to it can be found on my website: www.riodeltawild.com.

The Author.

Christina Mild has an M. S. in Biological Sciences. She taught high school science classes for most of her working life and now volunteers in revegetation and "locally-relevant environmental education." To contact her, send email to: <mild.christina@gmail.com>. For more information about native plants, visit her website at [www.riodeltawild.com].



Texas Huisache *Acacia smallii*

Nature Happenings Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas

For a comprehensive calendar of Nature Happenings go to **RGV Nature Coalition** at www.rgvnaturecoalition.org Scroll down to and click on Nature Events Calendar on right side

Sabal Palm Grove Sanctuary— Wonders of Nature. Call (956) 541-8034. Or go to www.tx.audubon.org/centers/sabal

Edinburg Scenic Wetlands and World Birding Center — **Bird Walks and Nature tours.** Native Plant Landscaping. 714 Raul Longoria Rd., Edinburg, TX (956) 381-9922.

Quinta Mazatlan - McAllen Wing of the World Birding Center— 600 Sunset Ave., McAllen, TX. Call Colleen Hook (956) 688-3370 for scheduled events

Bentsen Rio Grande Valley State Park WBC offers butterfly walks, bird walks, nature tours. Call 956-584-9156 for details and times.

Santa Ana NWR near Alamo offers **Nature Tram rides** with Interpreters at 9:30 a.m., 12 noon and 2:00 p.m. every day (956) 784-7500 or **Valley Nature Center** (956) 969-2475

Estero Llano Grande State Park WBC - 3301 International Blvd. (FM 1015) in Weslaco, TX Call (956) 565-3919 for scheduled events

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The Sabal is the Newsletter of the Native Plant Project and conveys information on the native habitat, and environment of the Lower Rio Grande Valley Texas. Co-editors: Gene Lester and Eleanor Mosimann. You are invited to submit articles for *The Sabal*. They can be brief or long. Articles may be edited for length and clarity. Black and white line drawings -- and colored photos or drawings -- with or without accompanying text are encouraged. We will acknowledge all submissions. Please send them, preferable in electronic form - either Word or WordPerfect - to: Native Plant Project, P.O. Box 2742, San Juan, TX 78589 or contact **Gene Lester @ 956-968-3454, or g-el1951@sbcglobal.net**

See *The Sabal* and our 5 handbooks on our website:
www.nativeplantproject.org

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Native Plant Project Annual Membership Application Form

Regular \$15 per year Contributing \$35 per year Lifelong \$250 one time fee per individual. Members are advised of meetings, field trips, and other activities through *The Sabal*. Dues are paid on a calendar year basis. Send checks to Native Plant Project, P.O. Box 2742, San Juan, Texas 78589.

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Comments/ suggestions/ speaker recommendations should be sent to: Native Plant Project, P.O. Box 2742, San Juan, TX 78589 or contact G. Lester (956)-968-3454; g-el1951@sbcglobal.net

Native Plant Project Meetings – March 25, 2008. **Board meeting** at 6:30 p.m.; **General meeting** at 7:30 p.m. Susan Thompson and Ann Vacek will present our annual Wildflowers of the Rio Grande Valley program. Come see the beauty that waits for you just down the road.

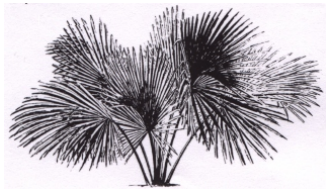
Board and General Meetings 2008:

January 22	March 25	May 27	October 28
February 26	April 22	September 23	November 25

SUMMARY OF THE MINUTES OF THE BOARD MEETING – February 26, 2008

President Hagne welcomed Maryann Wingert to her first board meeting. Thompson will head a committee to arrange and coordinate events that the NPP will attend each year for the sale of plants and to educate the public about native plants. King said that he and Dr. Al Richardson have written a book for future publication on native plants of the 4-county region.

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