



# The Sabal

[www.nativeplantproject.org](http://www.nativeplantproject.org)

## Designing a “Texas Wildscape”

by Sue Griffin

My objective as a designer of "Texas Certified Wildscapes" is to have the visitor be surprised when told its a native-plant garden. Often the general public has a misconception of what a 'Wildscapes' will look like. That may come from the name, but a Wildscape does not have to be wild or untrimmed. The only criteria for a certified Texas Wildscape is that it must contain three elements: cover, food sources, and water. I will discuss only the first two elements in this article.

When I start a Wildscape, I first conceive a landscape that could contain any type of plant material. The elements of any landscape include beds, borders, hedges, and hardscapes. After discussing the needs, anticipated uses, and what animals the customer wants to attract, I start a design. First I layout the paths and the beds. Location of trees is next. I then add patios and seating areas. Only after these elements are finalized, do I start to decide on plant material.

When choosing native plants for the landscape, I want to have a variety of colors, textures, and heights. I want to have some shade plants and some that will thrive in the South Texas sun. The water needs of each plant must be considered. Plants that naturally occur together in nature are more likely to survive in the same location in a designed landscape. I also want to consider the wildlife the customer wants to attract. Remember, butterflies and birds may be the predominate and showier wildlife, but dragonflies, lizards, toads, and deer may be the target for others.

Over the years I have developed lists of native plants that serve multiple purposes. I have an extensive library of books on native plants; including all of the Native Plant Project handbooks. I have built my list based on information found in these books and nearly twenty years of designing gardens. I also rely on advice from other native plant gardeners and nurserymen.

I thought I might share some of my lists with you and discuss how I use these to develop my designs.

I initiate the plant design starting with 'hedges'. I use the term hedges here rather loosely – it includes closely planted rows of similar plants to divide one area from another or designate boundaries; as well as foundation plantings along buildings, and fences.

Fiddlewood is an excellent plant for hedging. It is easy to prune, grows into a dense impenetrable wall that offers food and cover for birds and nectar or food source for butterflies and their larvae. In addition, Fiddlewood is a attractive plant. The white flowers and vibrant orange clusters of berries outshine many non-native plants used in hedges. The same could be said for Whitebrush, not only are the airy white blooms attractive, they are quite fragrant. Whitebrush is best used against walls and fences as its branches have a tendency to spread out and down. Other native plants used for hedges are listed in **List 1**.

After deciding what plants to use for all of the hedges, I determine what plants I want in each bed. I use a single species for the border of each bed. This gives a cohesive appearance to the bed and yet sets it aside as a unique area in the garden. I often use a variety of species to fill wide beds with plants that will be a gradation of heights. For example, a bed that has a row of native Wedelia with a row of Velvet leaf Lantana directly behind it draws the eye into the garden. I also use native Wedelia under a foundation plantings of Drummond's Turk's Cap. In a shade garden, Runyon's Waterwillow can be planted along the edge of a bed that contains Drummond's Turk's Cap, Kidneywood and Pigeonberry. Gaura softens the edge of a bed that contains Shrubby Blue Sage, Sweet Stem, Lantana, and a very large Cortez Croton. See **List 2** for additional plants I use for borders.

Shrubs are used throughout the landscape. Many shrubs have found a place in my landscapes. Often, like the Yellow Sophora, they are specimen plants - a species that has characteristics that set it aside from other plants and that deserves to be featured in a garden. A single Chapote that sits in a curve of a sidewalk, and a Cortez Croton that fills a corner of a fence are some of the specimens I feature in my gardens.

Other shrubs are desirable for their contribution to wildlife or, when grouped together, they call attention to themselves. Shrubby Blue Sage, Sweet Stem and Lantana are located on the south side of a front-yard garden. Specimen Chopote protects them from most afternoon sun and a Cortez Croton plus a wooden fence block the early morning sun. This semi-shade garden is where I have located a number of butterfly nectar plants. The Shrubby Blue Sage helps add height to the back of the garden and breaks up the monotony of the wooden fence. Lantana adds color most of the year, and the Sweet Stem adds a faint fragrance when it is in bloom. Other shrubs that I use in my designs can be found in **List 3**.

I combined Adelia, Golden Eye Daisy, and South Padre Island Mist Flower in a long bed that borders the parking lot at Ramsey Nature Park in Harlingen. The repetition of color, form and species is both pleasing to the eye and provides for ease of pollination. When planning gardens in public locations, my hope is that individuals can look at the garden and think, "I like this, I could do that at my house."

Location, location, location! No matter what design I have in mind it is necessary to remember the soil type and sun and water needs of each species. I never want to give the illusion that gardening with native means no work; by choosing the right location, for the right plant, there will be less work. Native plants are already adapted to the soil type and weather conditions of the area; however, some native plants, when removed from their natural environment and placed in a tended garden can be difficult to grow. Heart-leaf Hibiscus, with its showy red flowers is one of those, I have found a few rules to follow that will help it survive. It is its happiest when placed in a well drained area where it receives only late afternoon sun. It thrives on benign neglect, but often has to be replaced about every three to five years.

Mexican Trixis is another plant that struggled in my garden until I moved it to a sunnier location under a Cedar Elm tree. Here it spread and bloomed prolifically last fall.

When planning any Wildscape, I always have to remember the desires of the customer. Many native plants are considered weeds by the normal homeowner and when planning a garden for a home I usually choose shrubs and perennials that do not have thorns, and will not become an

invasive plant. Invasive in this case meaning that it will spread faster than it can be controlled or produce an over abundance of seeds. One 'invasive' plant that I do suggest for homeowners who wish to attract the largest number of birds is sunflowers. It may mean removing numerous seedlings in the late winter, early spring, but the results are worth it. Migrating and wintering warblers feed on the seeds and insects that gather on the plants. One visitor to the Sunflowers that I always enjoy are the American Goldfinches. I enjoy their antics as they hang upside down to harvest sunflower seeds.

I hope that by sharing some of my designing methods, I might inspire a you to try some of these combinations of plants and designs. Remember, A Wildscape is simply a garden that uses native plants to provide as much cover and food sources as possible for wildlife. Start an adventure: design your own Wildscape.

Sue Griffin, owner of Mother Nature's Creations, Harlingen, TX., is President of the Colorado Audubon Society and Board member of the Native Plant Project. For contact information see business card page 6.



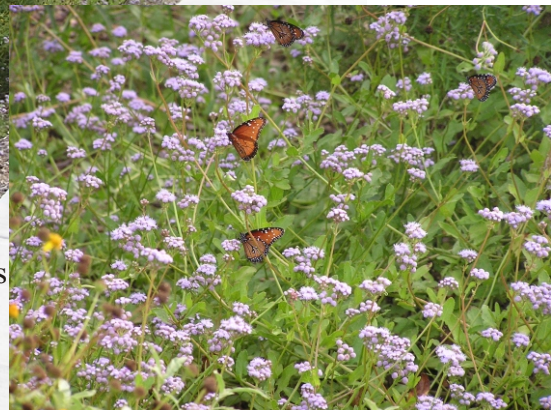
Fiddlewood hedge with close-up of fruit.



Whitebrush hedge with close-up of flowers.



SPI-mist flower,  
golden-eye daisy  
& Adelia border.



Butterflies  
on SPI  
Mist  
flower

<b>List 1. Unarmed plants used for hedges.</b>					
<b>Common Name</b>	<b>Scientific Name</b>	<b>Landscape value</b>	<b>Animal attracted</b>	<b>Food</b>	<b>Cover</b>
White brush	<i>Aloysia gratissima</i>	Scent	Goldfinches & warblers	Yes	Yes
Drummond's Turk's Cap	<i>Malvaviscus drummondii</i>	Red flower & seeds, easily pruned	Butterflies, hummingbirds, birds eat seeds	Yes	
Fiddlewood	<i>Citharexylum berlandieri</i>	Dense growth & shiny leaves, easily pruned	Allbirds eat the seeds	Yes	Yes
Purple Sage	<i>Leucophyllum frutescens</i>	Showy flowers, easily pruned	Theona Chekerspot & all birds attracted to seeds	Yes	Yes
Barbados cherry	<i>Malpighia glabra</i>	Pink flowers, red seeds, easily pruned	White-patched, & Brown-banded skippers, cassius blue butterfly; birds eat seeds	Yes	
Texas Torchwood	<i>Amyris texana</i>	Scent, structure of branches	Giant Swallowtail butterfly	Yes	
Adelia	<i>Adelia vaseyi</i>	Structure and leaf color	Mexican Bluewing butterfly	Yes	

<b>List 2. Plants used as borders, along walkways and in beds.</b>				
<b>Common Name</b>	<b>Scientific Name</b>	<b>Landscape value</b>	<b>Animal attracted</b>	<b>Food</b>
Runyon's Waterwillow	<i>Justicia runyonii</i>	Likes shade, purple flower	Malachite, Banded Peacock	Yes
Mex. evening Primrose	<i>Oenothera speciosa</i>	Large pink flowers, early spring blooming, very low growing, spreads	Nectar source for all butterflies	Yes
Betony or South Padre Island Mistflower	<i>Conoclinium (Eupatorium) betonicifolium</i>	Long blooming, blue flowers, spreads	Rounded Metalmark Nectar source for all butterflies	Yes
Wedelia or Orange Daisy	<i>Wedelia (Xexmenia) hispida</i>	Long and prolific bloomer, easy to maintain, seed source	Nectar source for all butterflies	Yes
Snake Herb	<i>Dyaschoriste crenulata</i>	Leaf color, blue flowers, easy to maintain	Nectar source for all butterflies	Yes

White Plumbago	<i>Plumbago scandens</i>	Blooms late into the evening, takes shade well	Marine & Cassius Blues butterflies	Yes
Gaura	<i>Gaura sp;</i>	Blooms on stalks, flowers showy	Nectar source for all butterflies	
Plains Coreopsis	<i>Coreopsis tinctoria</i>	Colorful, long blooming when deadheaded		Yes
Pigeonberry	<i>Rivina humilis</i>	Pink flowers followed by red fruit	Seeds eaten by most birds	Yes
Tropical Sage	<i>Salvia coccina</i>	Flowers during all temperate seasons	Seed eating birds, nectar source	Yes
Velvet Leaf Lantana	<i>Lantana velutina</i>	Long blooming, white flowers, easily pruned	Nectar source for all butterflies	Yes

**List 3. Shrubs used as accent plants or to attract a particular wildlife species.**

<b>Common Name</b>	<b>Scientific Name</b>	<b>Landscape value</b>	<b>Animal attracted</b>	<b>Food</b>	<b>Cover</b>
Sweet Stem	<i>Aloysia macrostachya</i>	Light airy plant with lavender blooms	Southern Dogface	Yes	
Mexican Trixis	<i>Trixis inula</i>	Clusters of small yellow flowers, good to fill under trees		Yes	Yes
Yellow Sophora	<i>Sophora tomentosa</i>	Velvetly leaves, large showy yellow flowers	Hummingbirds, warblers, and pollinators	Yes	
Shrubby Blue Sage	<i>Salvia ballotiflora</i>	Easily pruned, light blue flowers		Yes	Yes
Brushy Lippia	<i>Lippia alba</i>	Pink blooms along slender stalks, good for damp areas	White Peacock, Lantana Scrub-Hairstreak	Yes	
Texas Lantana	<i>Lantana horrida</i>	Bright colors in most seasons	Nectar source for all butterflies, birds eat the seeds	Yes	
Heart-Leaf Hibiscus	<i>Hibiscus martianus (cardiophyllus)</i>	Showy red flowers	Yojoa and mallow Scrub-Hairstreak	Yes	
Guayacan	<i>Guaiacum angustifolium</i>	Delicate orchid like flowers	Lyside Sulpher	Yes	
Baby's Bonnet	<i>Coursetia axillaris</i>	Stunning small pink flowers	Southern Dogface	Yes	
Golden Eye Daisy	<i>Viguiera stenoloba</i>	Large mounds of yellow flowers	Nectar source for all butterflies, birds eat the seeds	Yes	

## Nature Happenings Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas

For a comprehensive calendar of Nature Happenings go to **RGV Nature Coalition** at [www.rgvnaturecoalition.org](http://www.rgvnaturecoalition.org) Scroll down to and click on Nature Events Calendar on right side.

**Edinburg Scenic Wetlands and World Birding Center** — Birding, butterflies, caterpillars, bats, and photography programs, 714 Raul Longoria Rd., Edinburg, TX.

Call Marisa (956) 381-9922 or go to [www.edinburgwbc.org](http://www.edinburgwbc.org) for schedule.

**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.

**Valley Nature Center** (956) 969-2475 301 S. Border Ave., Weslaco, TX.

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

**Valley Proud Environmental Council** Celebrate our 25th Anniversary by planting a native tree. 3 new planting guides available; call Laura Maxwell (956) 412-8004, [vpec@sbcglobal.net](mailto:vpec@sbcglobal.net) or visit [www.valleyproud.org](http://www.valleyproud.org).

**NEW:** At NPP meetings, you will now be able to purchase native plants grown at the Perez Ranch Nursery and VNC. It's Arbor Month in the Valley. Encourage birds and butterflies to stop at your backyard by growing their food: Native Plants.

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Billy Snider, Jr.  
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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 @ 956-682-0549, 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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I wish to receive the *Sabal* at my e-mail address only

New  Renewal  Address Change

Comments/ suggestions/ speaker recommendations should be sent to: Native Plant Project, P.O. Box 2742, San Juan, TX 78589 or contact G. Lester (956)-682-0549; [g-el1951@sbcglobal.net](mailto:g-el1951@sbcglobal.net)

Native Plant Project Meetings – February 24, 2009. **Board meeting** at 6:30 p.m.; **General meeting** at 7:30 p.m. **Nick Hoelscher**, past president of NPP, will present “My Favorite Native Landscape Plants”. For over 20 years, Nick has been selling native plants at the Valley Garden Center in McAllen and is considered their resident scholar of horticulture. He is an expert on growing the Valley's natives and will have lots of tips to share.

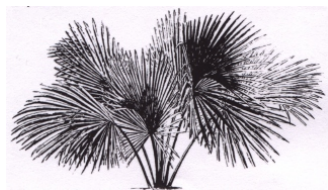
**Board and General Meetings 2009:**

**2009:** January 27    February 24    March 24    April 28    May 26  
          September 22    October 27    November 24

**SUMMARY OF THE MINUTES OF THE BOARD MEETING – JAN. 27, 2009**

Upcoming events were announced, including the McAllen Home Show (at which the NPP will have a booth) on March 27<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup>, and 29<sup>th</sup>; and The Invaders of Texas Workshop on April 18<sup>th</sup> at Estero Llano Grande State Park, Weslaco. The Board elected Eleanor Mosimann as President, Chris Hathcock as Vice-President, Susan Thompson as Secretary, and Bert Wessling as Treasurer.

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