



The Sabal

April 2012

Volume 29, number 4

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(Photos for this issue are primarily from Dr. Alfred Richardson; some by Christina Mild.)

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May Sabal topic: Milkweeds with surprising blooms, the many “other” Asclepiadaceae.

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April Meeting of the Native Plant Project:

Tuesday, April 24, 2012, 7:30pm

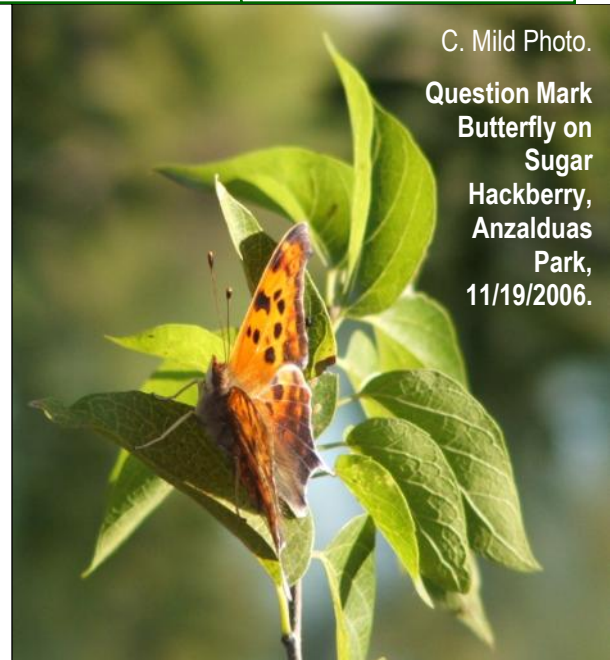
Valley Nature Center, 301 S. Border,
(in Gibson Park), Weslaco.

Research Entomologist **Dr. John Goolsby** on:

“A comparison of insect biodiversity on native vs. exotic trees in McAllen, TX”.

Goolsby’s study documents the value of planting native trees in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Insect biodiversity, including beneficial insects, was significantly higher on native trees as compared to exotic trees.

The study was conducted on urban trees along the hike and bike trail in McAllen, Dr. Goolsby’s hometown.



C. Mild Photo.

Question Mark
Butterfly on
Sugar
Hackberry,
Anzalduas
Park,
11/19/2006.

The Sabal is the newsletter of the Native Plant Project.

It conveys information on native plants, habitats and environment of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas.

Previous **Sabal** issues are posted on our website [www.NativePlantProject.org].

Electronic versions of our **Handbooks** on recommended natives for landscaping are also posted there.

Change of address, missing issue, or membership: <bwessling@rgv.rr.com>

President - Chris Hathcock - (956)-369-1744; <chris_hathcock@fws.gov>

The Genus *Asclepias*.

Milkweeds which “look like” milkweeds.

by Christina Mild

All of us probably know that Monarchs need milkweeds, though we can't know for absolute certain which members of the milkweed family, **Asclepiadaceae**, they actually prefer or utilize for egg-laying.

In the LRGV native plant community, it has long been debated whether one of the Monarch's obvious favorites, *Asclepias curassavica*, should be sold at native plant sales or nurseries.



Can you find the larva?

Locally, you'll find it growing in countless yards and butterfly gardens. It was introduced from the American tropics and is an escaped cultivar in our area. Although it's a poor idea to plant it near nature preserves, where it could cause concern, it's an attractive milkweed for the garden. In fact, it's beautiful.

In defense of planting it, one website on Monarchs pointed out that *Asclepias curassavica* is probably the very species which with the Monarch, being a tropical butterfly, evolved.

This is one of the few Monarch-beloved milkweeds which is easily propagated. Valley Nature Center sells it. Mike Heep grows it, as do many nurseries throughout the south. Aphids can be a problem, and monarch, queen and soldier larvae may eat up all the leaves. So try to save some seeds for starting it up anew.

For many years, Harlen E. and Altus Aschen of Port Lavaca, Calhoun County, TX, have been involved in Monarch Watch. They've developed a website over a series of many years to share their information and have added photos to help educators and others identify native milkweed species. Most of the south Texas

native *Asclepias* aren't showy. Their flowers are greenish, and most people don't even notice them.

Years ago I asked the Aschens if they found monarch eggs and larvae on the many species of native milkweed they keep watch over. They affirmed that this was so, but I think the milkweed they noted, like myself, may have been confined to what we think of as a typical milkweed, (the genus *Asclepias*) which is one reason we'll be continuing with “**Milkweeds With Surprising Flowers**” in the May issue.

The Aschen's website is well worth a visit:

[<http://asclepias.homestead.com/>]

Mike Quinn has explored this topic a bit further, including other common genera of Milkweed in his observations. This is an excerpt of information Quinn has published on the web regarding butterfly larval plant use of milkweeds:

Asclepias curassavica (Tropical Milkweed):
Monarch, Queen, Soldier

Asclepias oenotheroides (Zizotes): Monarch

Cynanchum barbigerum: Variegated Fritillary

Euptoieta claudia, the Variegated Fritillary, photo by Dave Hanson.



Matelea reticulata: (Pearl Milkvine): Monarch

Funastrum cynanchoides (*Sarcostemma*, Climbing Milkweed): Soldier

From this small amount of data, we find that the Monarch uses several genera and species of Milkweed and that other butterflies (even some not generally thought of as “Monarch-mimics,” i.e. the Variegated Fritillary), also use a milkweed species as a host plant.

Ken King points out Quinn's data as one of many examples which illustrate that we just haven't observed enough about most of our native plants to have an accurate idea of what does or doesn't use them. He has to attempt this explanation *ad nauseum* to people who want to know about any particular native species, "Well, what is it good for?"

The earlier-mentioned Mike Quinn, with collaborators Ba Rea and Karen Oberhauser, have made an exhaustive study of "the Invertebrate Community in the Milkweed Patch."

The resultant book, now in an expanded 2nd edition, is fascinating.



Most plants have an entire community of creatures interacting, visiting, eating, loafing, copulating, etc. Few of those dramas have been studied and illustrated to the extent of these authors.

To order the book or find out more about it, visit:

<http://basrelief.org/index.html>

I loaned my 1st edition to a grandfather guiding his young boy scout towards an insect badge. We had a particular problem at Harlingen's Ramsey Park with *Funastrum cynanchoides*, *Sarcostemma*, the ubiquitous Climbing Milkweed, which was overpowering a particular shrub. The scout and his grandfather cleaned off the complex mass of *Sarcostemma*, protected the shrub, and collected enough insects for an outstanding project. With Quinn et. al.'s book, they were able not only to identify the insects, but to have a pretty good idea of what they might be up to.

The collaborators of this book also do a smashing job of explaining and illustrating (with color photos) the unique way that milkweeds transfer pollen to visiting insects. Paired pollen sacs (pollinia) often become



attached to visiting insects, who unwittingly carry them along and fertilize the next milkweed they visit. The insect above (photo from the web) appears to have picked up pollinia on both front legs.

So, let's look at some deep South Texas native *Asclepias* species which you may be overlooking.

You probably can't find this first one for sale anywhere. If you notice the black soaker hose alongside, you might guess correctly that it's in cultivation. It's one of many rescue specimens of this species planted at Ramsey Park by volunteers. The other dozen or so

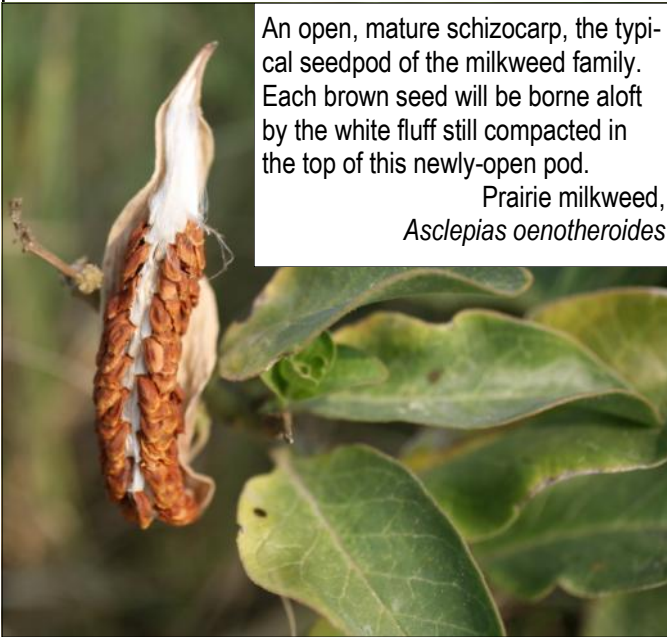


Prairie milkweed, *Asclepias oenotheroides*

perished, some immediately, most quickly and some eventually.

It is: "Prairie Milkweed," *Asclepias oenotheroides*, found throughout Cameron, Hidalgo, Willacy and Starr counties. It blooms from spring through fall. Although it's one of our most common milkweeds, it's not usually found in colonies, but in rather spotty distribution, growing from hard-packed clay to salt-laden sandy vacant lots along the coast. It's a host to Queen butterflies, as well as Monarchs, and who can say to what else?

If you'd like to propagate native milkweed species, it would be wise to collect some seed and try your luck with growing it.



An open, mature schizocarp, the typical seedpod of the milkweed family. Each brown seed will be borne aloft by the white fluff still compacted in the top of this newly-open pod.

Prairie milkweed,
Asclepias oenotheroides

you don't forget what, when & where you collected.

The genus *Asclepias* has intricate umbels of flowers which are awfully hard to describe, but which you can probably learn to recognize. Here's an enlargement of Prairie milkweed flowers, one of the many photos provided for this issue by Dr. Alfred Richardson.



Here's an analogy I found somewhere on the web regarding the unusual transport method for milkweed pollen:

A milkweed flower is like a convenience store that only sells nectar, but sticks a locked backpack full of pollen on you before you leave. You don't have the key to the backpack, and the only way to get rid of it is to go into another convenience store of the same kind!

Mike Heep has tried rescuing this species from his own pasture, and relates a tale filled with frustration. The dry, hard clay where he usually finds it is almost impossible to dig and the plant's tuber is awfully deep. Then, the plant seems to prefer dry, or at least, very well-drained soils.

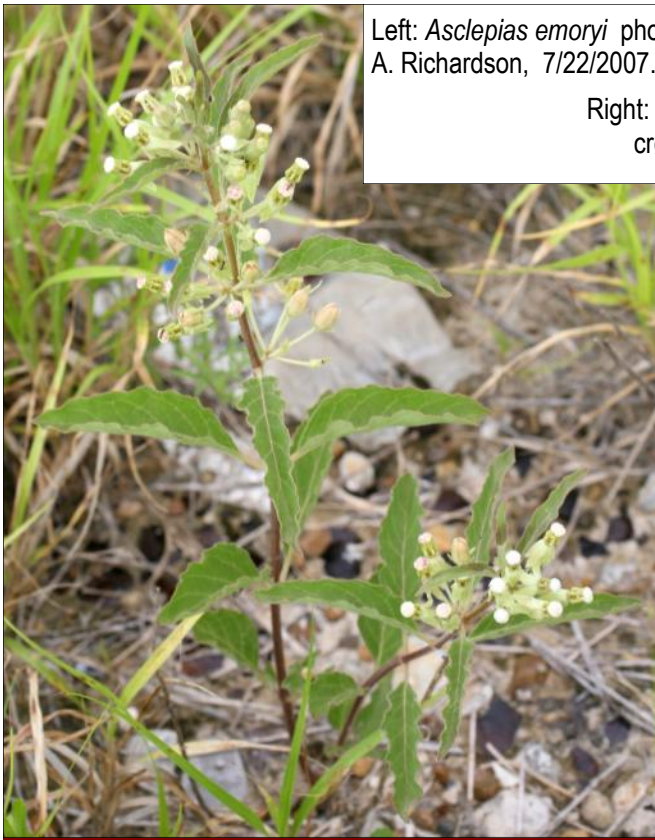
Quite a few of us have probably killed our "rescued" plants with the kindness of too much water. That's why Ken King recommends that a lot of us who want to help in the effort to maintain our native plant diversity should help to experiment with growing things from seed.

As always, please avoid collecting "every seed you find," especially from rare plants. Collecting a few and remembering to plant them is probably the key.

Those bank envelopes with the sticky top-seal (which convey your cash or your deposit slip) make dandy seed envelopes, which you can also write on, so



Unidentified larva on milkweed flower, pollinia stuck on leg. Photo taken from the web.



Left: *Asclepias emoryi* photographed by A. Richardson, 7/22/2007.

Right: details of the bloom clusters cropped from the same photo.



Asclepias emoryi

is found in Hidalgo and Starr counties in south Texas.

It flowers from March through October and is a perennial herb up to 16" tall.

The plant can be ascendent or decumbent (leaning over).

Leaf margins appear wavy.

It is found in sandy prairies and dry plains, spreading to roadsides and railways in west central and south Texas and northeastern Mexico.

It was named for William H. Emory (1811-1887), who led the United States-Mexico boundary survey.

Asclepias linearis grows up to 24" tall. The linear leaf blades (Line-Leaf Milkweed) can be 3" or longer. Slender stems bear almost no hair, usually branching only at or near ground level. Short, shallowly-buried rootstocks are perennial. Flowering occurs from May to November.

Observed by Al Richardson & Ken King in areas that retain water longer after rains, such as roadside ditches.

Jann Miller is cultivating this species in her Harlingen, TX yard.

(Texas Endemic species.)

Asclepias linearis photographed by A. Richardson on Coffee Port Rd., Brownsville, 10-29-2011. Note the developing seedpod, lower left.



On the left: note the beauty and complexity of *Asclepias linearis* blooms, cropped from Dr. Richardson's photo of the entire plant.



Above: *Asclepias prostrata* photographed by C. Mild on Mar 9, 2005 on a fieldtrip with Ken King and A. Richardson to Starr County and beyond.

Right: A detailed photo by A. Richardson taken on Alvares Rd, in Starr County, on May 1, 2010. Note the sandy, rocky habitat and the range of bloom-stages. The most mature bloom clusters are about due-right, with less mature clusters below, and clustered bloom buds at the bottom. Photos taken in other regions and at different times show dark purplish green at the floral base.

***Asclepias prostrata* is a rarity**, occurring in a very narrow band of southwestern Texas into Tamaulipas. (Hidalgo & Starr counties in our area.) It is found in sandy loam soils.

The prostrate habit distinguishes this from other milkweed species. It is an herbaceous perennial arising from a broad and woody crown.

Flowering typically occurs from June through August.

There is an excellent illustration of the knobby follicles of *Asclepias prostrata* and a thorough written species account in **Rare Plants of Texas, 2007**, by our recent speaker Bill Carr and his collaborators (pgs. 98-99).

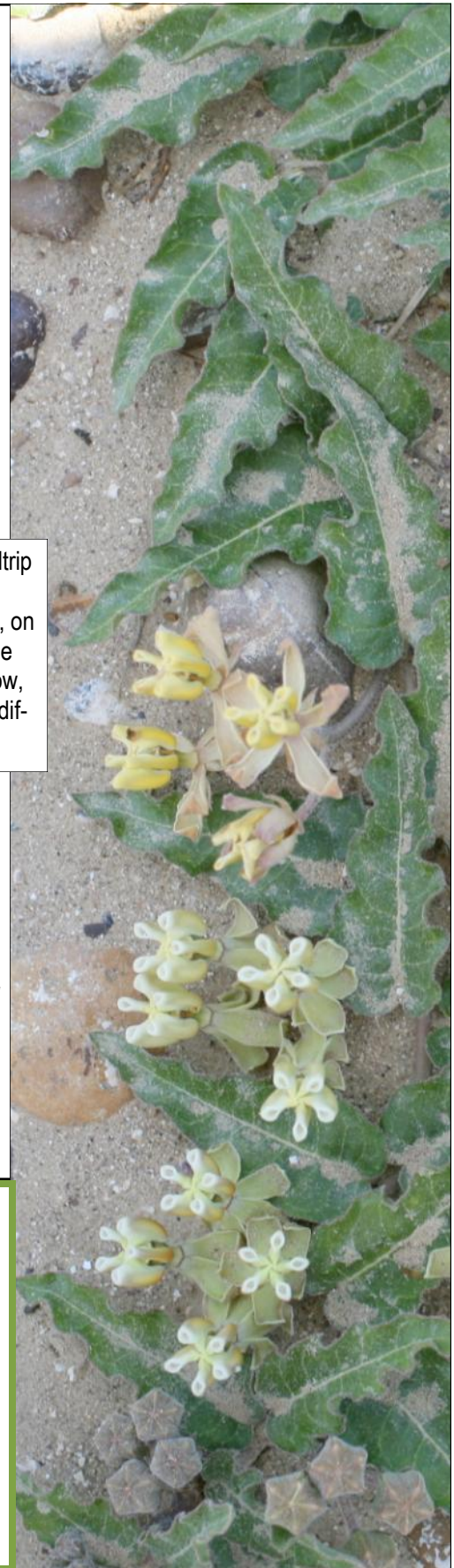
The need to locate individuals of this species and to collect & preserve the seed is especially important.

Many details in this issue were taken from and additional information on *Asclepias* species occurring locally may be found in:

Plants of Deep South Texas, 2011, by Alfred Richardson & Ken King. (*Asclepias obovata*, not included in this Sabal issue, is found on pg. 75, and also on the Aschen's website.)

The Useful Wild Plants of Texas, Vol. II, 2000, by Cheatam, Johnston & Marshall.

Manual of the Vascular Plants of Texas, 1979, by Correll & Johnston.



LRGV Native Plant Sources

Heep's Nursery (& Landscaping)

(Mike Heep)
1714 S. Palm Court Drive
Harlingen, TX 78552
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Valley Nature Center

301 S. Border Ave.
Weslaco, TX 78596
(956) 969-2475
<info@valleynaturecenter.org>
[www.valleynaturecenter.org]

Perez Ranch Nursery

(Betty Perez & Susan Thompson)
12 miles north of La Joya, TX
(956) 580-8915
<PerezRanchNatives@gmail.com>

Mother Nature's Creations

(Billy & Sue Snider)
2822 Nueces, Harlingen, TX 78550
Nursery open by appointment:
(956) 428-4897

NABA Butterfly Park
Old Military Hwy & Butterfly Pk Dr
Mission, TX 78552
(956) 583-9009

Rancho Lomitas Nursery
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P.O. Box 442
Rio Grande City, TX 78582
(956) 486-2576 *By appt. only

Valley Garden Center
701 E. Bus. Hwy. 83
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NPP Board & General Meetings held at Valley Nature Center (ABOVE)

(Fourth Tuesday each month)

Board Meetings at 6:30pm. Speaker at 7:30pm.

Next Program, Tues., May 22nd, 2012:

Mike Heep, Native Plant Nurseryman / Revegetation Specialist speaks on very unique species of deep south Texas:



*“The Primitive Plants
Around Us”*

FROM: NPP; POB 2742; San Juan, TX 78589

The **Native Plant Project (NPP)** has no paid staff or facilities. NPP is supported entirely by memberships and contributions.

Anyone interested in native plants is invited to join. Members receive 8 issues of **The Sabal** newsletter per year in which they are informed of all project activities and meetings.

Meetings are held at:

Valley Nature Center, 301 S. Border, Weslaco, TX.

Native Plant Project Membership Application

Regular \$20/yr. Contributing \$45/yr

Life \$250 one time fee/person

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TO:

Soapberry in bloom. C. Mild photo.

Insect information from Ken King:
Pepsis wasp. We call them tarantula hawks. Females lay eggs on spiders they have stung and paralyzed for their larvae to feed upon.

Native Plant Project presents:

April 24, 2012, 7:30pm

John Goolsby speaks on:

***Insect Diversity
on Native Tree Species.***

**at Valley Nature Center
301 S. Border
(in Gibson Park),
Weslaco.
956-969-2475**

