



The Sabal

www.nativeplantproject.org

Watering the brush...and the dirt.

by Christina Mild

It may seem absurd to water the brush, until you give it a try. I'd like to explain why you should, indeed, adopt such a strategy.

At Rio Grande Nature Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico (situated on the Rio Grande) automatic watering systems were installed over 20 years ago, to water the understory of a mature forest. The purpose was to encourage germination of a "target species," native cottonwood trees, which were rapidly disappearing along the river with the cessation of seasonal floods. The immediate effect was to produce lush understory diversity and excellent humus. The texture and aroma of that wonderful growing medium has remained in my mind, as well as the technique for producing it.

Frontera Audubon is an example of mature brush which has benefited greatly from

regular deep watering. The addition of understory plant species within the park necessitated watering, and the result was magnificent in beauty as well as documented increases in wildlife diversity.



Berlandier's Wolfberry

Lycium berlandieri

Irrigated edges of the South Padre Island Convention Center are some of the best places to see plant species diversity of the coastal area, as growth, flowering and seed production are all enhanced by irrigation overspray. This “wasted” water, intended for a lush carpet-grass, promotes the growth of many species known to be host plants for a wide diversity of butterflies.

On occasion I’ve been asked to lead native plant fieldtrips thru nature preserves during a period of prolonged drought. I am, of course, expected to point out the wonderful attributes of our native plant species. It’s pretty hard to do so when I’m faced with a vast array of dried and withered specimens barren of leaves, fruit or blooms.

At Quinta Mazatlan, for example, native brush was dry and desolate while planted exotics like bougainvillea were well-watered and magnificent a few yards away. At Llano Grande, newly-planted natives are well-equipped with an automatic watering system while nearby native brush is dry, desolate and inundated with exotics.

I’m as likely as the next person to forget the potential of existing brush. Frugivore Corridor at Ramsey Park remains unwatered (because a guinea grass infestation is yet to be cleaned out) while I water newly-planted areas with great deliberation.

I think it’s important to recognize that much of the valley would have been covered with seasonal flooding prior to “civilization.” In my opinion, it is important to provide a bit of extra water to the native brush, wherever possible. This is probably as important as watering planted gardens and yards. It is likely that most chunks of relatively undisturbed native brush, if watered, will produce more food for wildlife than any comparably-sized area of human-planted vegetation.

I’ve watered such naturally-occurring brushy areas at Ramsey Park and in my own yard with what I consider to be beautiful results. Both of those sites, situated along

the Arroyo Colorado, would have been seasonally flooded prior to damming of the Rio Bravo (e.g. Rio Grande, Rio de Las Palmas).

One of the plants which respond exceptionally well to spring watering is Berlandier’s Wolfberry, which puts forth prolific crops of tasty fruit. Some plants won’t tolerate standing water for long periods, so it’s important to know how much drainage individual species require. For the most part, species which grow in the Arroyo Colorado brush can withstand seasonal flooding (in case you, like me, are a bit forgetful from time to time).

It is time for us to consider watering areas of native brush, especially in areas set aside as nature sanctuaries and especially along established trails, wherever irrigation is possible. Irrigation of the native brush should go hand in hand with removal of exotic pest species. It should be ranked equal in importance with revegetation efforts. With irrigation, brushy species will be able to produce leaves, flowers and fruit. Understory subshrubs, herbaceous species and vines will begin to reappear from areas where they had disappeared. The soil in undisturbed wild areas is a storehouse of vegetative diversity which we should fully exploit with the addition of water, wherever it is possible to irrigate. This method of providing diversity is at least as important as the addition of new plant material, i.e. revegetation.

Friends who own property along the Arroyo Colorado have often asked me what species to plant beneath the understory of trees, where they have kept the area mown or “cleaned” for years. My advice has always been the same. “Soak the area well. Flood it. See what comes up. Then decide whether you actually need to plant anything.”

Undisturbed soils contain an incredible storehouse of seed. We’ve utilized this treasure trove of seed in revegetating Ramsey Park. Wherever we rescue plants, we also collect soil, if topsoil is deep or plentiful, and cast it around the areas where



Mexican Trixis (*Trixis inula*) yellow flowers, and Mistflower (*Tamaulipa azurium*)



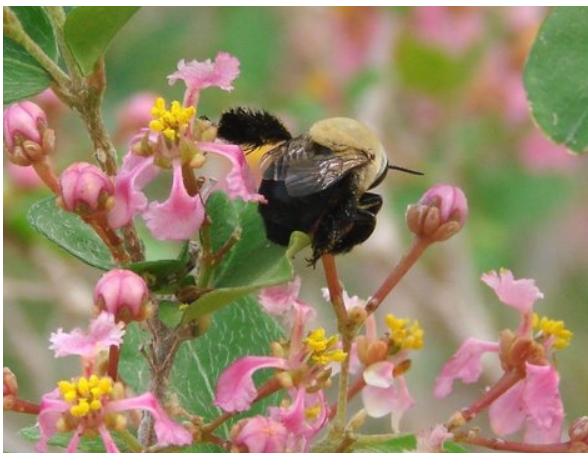
Shrubby Blue Sage (*Salvia ballotiflora*)



Texas thistle (*Cirsium texanum*) and a monarch butterfly



Vasey adelia (*Adelia vaseyi*) in fruit



Manzanita (*Malpighia glabra*) and bee



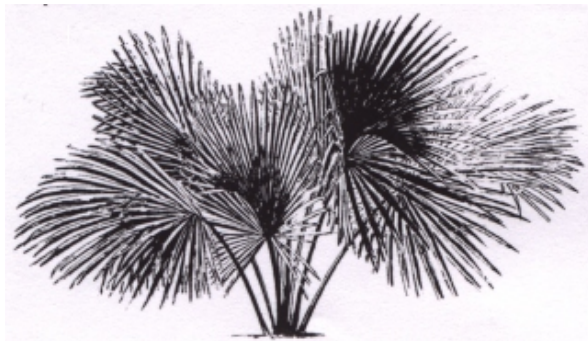
Watered Berlandier's Wolfberry

rescued specimens will be watered. (We've seen that bulldozers routinely bury any topsoil beneath a compressed layer of clay wherever building sites are prepared.) The results of casting topsoil about have been very good. We've often been surprised at the array of species which appear, especially after ample rain.

People may think you're daffy when you begin to water the brush and flood the dirt, until they see what you manage to produce. With a bit of luck, the idea might just begin to catch on.

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]. **All photos are compliments of the author.**



NOTE: Streetwise Weeds.

Poc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA 105, 379-99 (2008)
from *Nature* 13 Mar. 2008.

City weeds are adapting to their urban environment at a staggering rate, suggests a research team in France.

French scientists from France's basic-research agency in Montpellier analyzed the dispersal of the weed *Crepis sancta*, which, currently produces two types of seed - a light, feathery, wind-dispersed wild type and a heavy-seeded one found only in the city. The researchers found that feathery seeds dispersed along Montpellier's city streets had only a 45% chance of success settling in their parent's local 'patch' versus the heavy seed. In 'patchy' (pavement dense habitat), *C. sancta* releases a significantly higher proportion of heavy seeds than do their country counterparts.

Genetic evolution suggests that short-term evolution has taken place during a mere 5 to 12 generations.



Left-- Flowering Colima (*Zanthoxylum fagara*) being pollinated. Other common names for this plant are Lime prickly-ash, and Una de Gato; a member of the citrus family.

Right-- Watered Anacua (*Ehretia anacua*). Other common names are Sugarberry, and Sandpaper tree. Wildlife have use for this tree's flowers, fruit, cover, and nest sites.



Left-- Mistflower (*Tamaulipa azurium*). Not only is this plant showy, it is very attractive to butterflies.

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

Valley Proud Environmental Council from bagging grass clippings to Captain Crab puppet shows, call Laura Maxwell 956-412-8004, vpec@sbcglobal.net or visit www.valleyproud.org

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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)-968-3454; g-el1951@sbcglobal.net

Native Plant Project Meetings – May 27, 2008. **Board meeting** at 6:30 p.m.; **General meeting** at 7:30 p.m. **Drew Bennie** will present “Mushrooms”. Drew ‘s interest in fungi began when he attended the Telluride CO mushroom festival in 2001 and again in 2002. The wet fall last year allowed Drew to photograph the rarely seen and often strikingly beautiful mushrooms and fungi native to our Lower Rio Grande Valley. Come learn how to identify and use the mushrooms that will return with the rains.

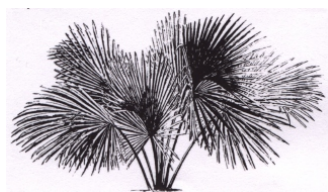
Board and General Meetings 2008:

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

SUMMARY OF THE MINUTES OF THE BOARD MEETING – April 22, 2008

Director Mosimann continues to seek photos of native plants for the new display screen. Director King reported that a new plant species discovered near the salt lakes in 2005, *Wissadula parvifolia*, was recently described by Paul Fryxel in the journal *Lendelia*. He offered to give a presentation on unusual plants of the LRGV at an upcoming NPP meeting.

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