



# The Sabal

May 2015

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Page numbers for plant species shown in the Sabal refer to: **"Plants of Deep South Texas" (PDST).**

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May 2015 Mtg., Native Plant Project:

**Tues., May 26th, 2015: at 7:30pm**

The Native Plant Project will present:

"Planting, Trimming & Growing Native Trees"

*by Drew Bennie*

The Native Plant Project will have Drew Bennie instruct us on the finer points of planting, trimming, and growing native trees. Learn how to establish a healthy, shady refuge in your own yard to benefit not only the birds but your own tranquility. Besides creating his own gorgeous gardens, Drew is a Master Naturalist, a Master Gardener, and NPP Board member.



Tepeguaje. *Leucaena pulverulenta*. PDST 245. Beautifully-delicate foliage. Attracts many insects and birds.

The meeting is held at: Valley Nature Center, 301 S. Border, (in Gibson Park), Weslaco. 956-969-2475

**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](http://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](mailto:bwessling@rgv.rr.com)>

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## Native Plants of the Coastal Area, A Report on their Status —by Christina Mild

One of my favorite springtime activities is photographing the “wildflowers” surrounding South Padre Island (SPI) Convention Center.

I’ve also enjoyed photographing the planted native gardens there and at the woodlots on Sheepshead Dr.

The focus of these planted “native” gardens has been to introduce taller native species, where descending birds can seek shelter and refuel for the continuation of their migratory voyage. This project has been successful in attracting a wide range of birds and butterflies, and nature photographers are almost always present.

While the large introduced natives receive the notice of visitors, most of the native diversity of the coastal area goes almost unnoticed by the public.

Dr. Al Richardson notes this fact in his excellent book “Wildflowers and Other Plants of Texas Beaches and Islands,” 2002, p xiii:

“Most visitors to the beaches, and even many residents, see only the sands between the surf and the first low dunes. Since only a few plants grow in this small section, it is easy to get the impression that these areas consist mostly of barren sand. In fact, the opposite is true. Beyond that first low dune there is an amazing variety and abundance of native plant species. ... Over seven hundred species of flowering plants have been found growing on Texas beaches and islands.”

Regarding the scope of his book, Richardson states (p xiv): “About 38 percent of the species reported for the islands are illustrated. It is my hope that, through use of the illustrations and descriptions, the reader will come to appreciate and learn more about the natural flora of this rich area.” Photographs in this publication are great!

I especially love the tiny flowering plants which are able to grow in low-nitrogen sandy soils of “vacant lots” on South Padre Island. In the past, these existed adjacent to roads and sidewalks, and were easily accessed. Most of these native species are relatively short and some are incredibly tiny.

Over the course of time, my “spring coastal wildflower” photographic mission has become an exercise in frustration and futility, rather than blissful discovery. What has changed?

- ◆ Turf grass has been planted over the native diversity around virtually every building, including “nature” centers.
- ◆ Turf grass is fertilized, watered, and allowed to grow into and over native species diversity.
- ◆ Roadside plants are mown down to an inch of their lives (no more Plains Milkweed present on the roadsides).
- ◆ Disturbance by humans and their machines has led to increased invasion by such exotic invasive grasses as **buffle** and guinea grass.



### Why Am I So Obsessed With Exotic Grasses?

Referring back to the April Sabal issue, you will remember Douglas Tallamy's data on food availability for wildlife vs. native species diversity. In a monoculture of exotic grass, such as St. Augustine, few local insects have mouth parts adapted to eat the exotic leaves. Thus other animals reliant directly or indirectly upon insects suffer a massive food shortage.

Tallamy further elaborates (p 50-51) that the horticultural industry has focused on the sale of exotic plants which are not palatable to "insect pests."

A look at Wikipedia on "St. Augustine grass" demonstrates this quite well.

### How Did We Acquire an Affinity for Manicured Lawns and Severely-Sheared Roadsides?

The late author Andy Wasowski wrote a number of excellent books with co-author wife Sally. One of these is "The Landscaping Revolution: Garden with Mother Nature, Not Against Her," 2000.

Wasowski was fed up with the work and expense of maintaining his Texas lawn, and began researching the history of lawns and especially lawn alternatives.

The Wasowskis present a wide range of reasons why humans are so obsessed with lawns.

One of the earliest inclinations probably arose in the Pleistocene era, when our ancestors found short grass savannas a real asset when hunting and avoiding predators.

By the 17th and 18th century in Europe, "virtually every locale had some big shot with a title...he lived in a large castle...which was surrounded by ... a lawn."

Lesser mortals couldn't afford such obvious luxury, but proudly created their own lawns as soon as they could feed themselves.

The popularity of golfing led to advertisers promoting lawn care products by advising the consumer to consult golf course greens' managers for product recommendations.

During the world wars, civilians were deprived of equipment and chemicals to care for lawns, as metals and chemicals were diverted to wartime necessities. "The end of World War II really sparked the expansion of (lawns)... The chemical and munitions industries, freed from their wartime responsibilities, turned to manufacturing and promoting lawn chemicals and fertilizers."

When the Wasowskis published their book in 2000, the lawn-care industry was nothing to sneeze at (p 2) "...according to the Lawn Care Institute, turf and lawn maintenance ... is a \$27 billion a year industry. That's ten times more than we spend on school textbooks."

How sad is that?



Photo lower right: St. Augustine grass sprawls over hardly-visible, naturally-occurring Betony Leaf Mistflower, PDST 93. The mistflower isn't doing well with so much competition for water, light and nutrients.

Photo upper right: Growing away from competing exotic grasses, this specimen of the same mistflower provides nectar for a very worn Buckeye Butterfly. Betony (SPI) mistflower is also a favorite of Queen butterflies.



**How can we acquaint the public with the wonderfully-diverse natives occurring in coastal areas?**

The practice of planting (fertilizing, and watering) turf grass adjacent to undisturbed natural areas should cease. Natural areas, if they need to be mown at all, should be mown high and infrequently. Exotic invasive grass species of all kinds should be removed from “natural areas” to allow species diversity to return.

It would help greatly to create some simple stone pathways thru areas of low-growing natural diversity.



A small sample of blooming “wildflowers” on SPI in early May 2015:

Top Left: Square Bud Primrose, *Calylophus serrulatus*, PDST 335.

Top Right: Sea Beach Pimpernel, *Samolus ebracteatus*, PDST 361.

Bottom Left: Scarlet Pea, *Indigofera miniata*, PDST 264.

Bottom Right: Seaside Goldenrod, *Solidago sempervirens*, PDST 125.

This is a great butterfly nectar plant. It was alive with lovebugs.



### How Disturbed Should We Be About Disturbance?

According to Douglas Tallamy's research: "Often...aliens colonize disturbed areas faster than do native plants and then subsequently prevent native colonists from reestablishing the plant community that was in place before the disturbance." (from "Bringing Nature Home," p 44)

Prime examples of this are the increasingly common colonies of buffle grass and guinea grass on South Padre Island, wherever construction or other human disturbance has occurred. These are not impossible problems to combat, but they require some education and willingness to take responsibility.

On a recent trip to Cozumel, I asked a worker, in Spanish, the name of the plant he was chopping on. I understood "limpieza," and told my family, "They call it the "clean" plant." My husband, who understands Spanish much better than I, was quite amused. "He told you," he explained: "I don't know anything about the plant, I'm just cleaning it!" All too often, this is the case. Caretakers receive a minimum of education and supervision.

Photos on left show **buffle grass** growing amidst Sea Ox Eye Daisy and Betony Mistflower. Right hand photo shows **guinea grass** in the gardens at SPI Convention Center.





Much of the diversity of our coastal areas is comprised of small plants which fall below the radar of the average person. You must step out of the car and walk about to notice them. Many of them are legumes, essential parts of an ecosystem where sandy soils are low in nitrogen.

The yellow bloom above is Flax, *Linum alatum*, PDST 293.

Below left, a snail sits on Sombrerillo, PDST 70-71.

Below right: *Crotalaria retusa*, PDST 256: blooms, barren stems, & seedpods. *Crotalaria* was introduced long ago to SPI for soil improvement. It's a legume. The bulk of the leaves were apparently eaten off the large colony I observed, so I assume that we have animals which can eat the foliage. *Crotalaria* is a favorite for butterfly gardens.



## LRGV Native Plant Sources

See also our  
Sponsors on right

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

**Please be aware that the following vendors may also sell non-natives.**

**NABA Butterfly Park**  
Old Military Hwy/3333 Butterfly Pk Dr  
Mission, TX 78572  
office (956) 583-5400  
Marianna Trevino Wright, Exec.Dir.  
cell 956-648-7117  
<marianna@nationalbutterflycenter.org>  
[http://www.nationalbutterflycenter.org]

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

**Valley Garden Center**  
701 E. Bus. Hwy. 83  
McAllen, TX 78501  
(956) 682-9411

**M&G Double D Native Plants &  
Seeds of South Texas**, (Gail Dantzker)  
956-342-5979; <gdld@att.net>  
7500 N 21st St; McAllen, TX 78504  
[mandgdoubled.com]  
*Grown at The Woods, Willacy Cty., TX.*

### **Landscapers using Natives:**

Williams Wildscapes, Inc.  
(Allen Williams)  
750 W Sam Houston  
Pharr, TX 78577  
(956) 460-9864  
[www.williamswildscapes.com]  
Landscaping, Etc. Inc.  
**Noel Villarreal**  
125 N. Tower Rd, Edinburg  
956-874-4267  
956-316-2599

## *Sponsors (Native Plant Nurseries)*

Heep's LRGV Native Plant Nursery  
Owned and operated by Mike and Claire Heep  
We grow plants suited to landscaping  
and revegetation in south Texas.  
1714 S. Palm Court Drive, Harlingen, TX 78552  
(956) 457-6834 <heepsnursery@gmail.com>  
**[www.heepsnursery.com]**



*Come visit the VNC:*  
301 S. Border Ave.  
Weslaco, TX 78596  
(956) 969-2475  
info@valleynaturecenter.org  
www.valleynaturecenter.org



**Native Plants  
for Sale**

*Watch Birds  
& Butterflies*

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in the Heart of the  
Rio Grande Valley*

**Valley Nature Center**  
-6 acre Nature Park & Trails -Book & Gift Shop-  
-Native Plant Nursery-Meeting Room-  
-Environmental Education and Exhibit Hall-



Above: Indian Blanket or Firewheel, *Gaillardia pulchella* PDST 100.  
Now is the time to collect wildflower seeds.  
Store them in a dry place, in paper bags or envelopes.

### **NPP Board & General Meetings held at Valley Nature Center**

(see ABOVE)  
(Fourth Tuesday each month)

**Board Meetings 6:30pm**  
**— Speaker 7:30pm.**

**Meeting Dates for 2015:**  
**Sept.22, Oct.27, Nov. 24.**

*Thank You to  
Hannah Buschart and  
Erik Ostrander for  
their service on the  
NPP Board.  
We wish them well  
on their move to Houston!*

**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

Other donation: \_\_\_\_\_

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I'm choosing the "green option!"

**Send my SABAL via .pdf file to:**

Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

*Please mail this form with dues check payable to:*

Native Plant Project, POB 2742, San Juan, TX 78589-7742

**TO:**

**NPP May meeting/speaker on:**

**Tues., May 26th, 2015: at 7:30pm**

The Native Plant Project will present:

**"Planting, Trimming & Growing  
Native Trees"**

*by Drew Bennie*

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**at:**

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



Soapberry Tree, Jaboncillo. *Sapindus saponaria*. PDST 380. In full bloom in Harlingen May 17, 2015. An old-fashioned native, uncommon in "modern" landscapes. A bit dangerous to plant adjacent to a sidewalk or driveway; mature fruits are the size and hardness of a "shooter" marble. Native to most of Texas, the foliage exhibits attractive yellow tints during times of stress (drought or cold temperatures). Many bees were attempting a landing on these blooms, but thwarted by high winds.

**In this issue: Coastal Area Natives.**