



# The Sabal

## **From Season to Season**

*by Benito Trevino Jr.*

It never fails. Each summer I get calls from people wanting to landscape their yards. I do not like to make a plant sale for the sake of making money, so I always try to discourage them from planting. I know it goes against our way of thinking, but I do not like to landscape after January. In fact, I prefer not to landscape after December. I will give in to the desires of my customers and go as far as January, but not because that is what I would do if it was solely up to me. I thought for a long time about why

most people like to landscape at the end of February or beginning of March. I concluded that this is the time when we feel that the cold weather is behind us and nice pleasant days are ahead of us. It is true that this is not a bad time to start planting, if we want to put in a garden and plant tomatoes, peppers, squash and other vegetables. However, if we stop and think, most of the things we plant in our garden are short lived annuals. That is to say, they will grow, flower, and produce seeds in one form or another and die. Most will be dead by the end of June or July when the temperatures are usually hot and dry. Which brings me to

my point — if you are interested in planting perennials, long lived trees and shrubs, then it is not wise to plant in the beginning of the year, you want to plant in late September or early October. I have spent the last 20 years of my life planting one kind of seed or another and have grown well over half a million plants. Believe me, you do not do the same thing for 20 years and not learn a thing here and there. I have noticed that here in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, September is a magic month, and I will tell you why I say that. Usually the temperature starts to rise into the 90's by the end of May or early June, and July and August are usually in the high 90's and as high as 110 degrees. We might start September with hot weather, but usually by the second week we will get a rain or change in the atmosphere and the temperatures will start dropping. After about the second week of September, the temperature will fluctuate, usually getting cooler until about the second week of February. By the end of February, the temperature will start to rise and by June, we will once again start reaching the high 90's and 100 mark.

If we plant a tree, say in mid-March, we head down a long path of hard work and high water bills just to keep the poor tree alive. When you transplant a tree, it has limited roots to support limited branches. When you plant it in March, the tree has just gone through the cold winter, so it is still not very active. As the temperature begins to rise,

the tree becomes active and will start to put on new leaves and branches. By mid-April, it might look real good with lots of leaves and many new branches. Underground, however, there is a big problem. There are not enough roots to support the water needs from all those new leaves and branches. As if things were not bad enough, May is just around the corner, and as the temperature continues to rise, so does the demand for more water. The tree may start to decline since the demand for water from the new growth is not meet by the small roots underground. Although additional watering will slow the decline, the problem is not necessarily your lack of watering. The problem is the imbalance between the leaves and branches at the top of the tree, and their demand for water, and the roots at the bottom of the tree, and their inability to absorb the amount of water demanded by the top of the tree. And during June, July and August, the temperature will be from the high 90's to as hot as 110. What are you going to do? You have to continue to water the poor tree and hope you do not over do it. Yes, you can over do it and drown the tree. The roots need to breathe, and too much water will form mud which shuts off the oxygen exchange between the air and the roots. If the tree survives the hot summer, it will be stressed and might stop growing for as long as 5 years. Yes, you still need to water and feed it from time to time, but it might not respond since it is in shock. You

planted the tree at the wrong time of year, and it has cost you a lot of labor and water just to keep it alive. How can you avoid all this anguish and frustration? **Plant in October!** When you plant in October, you give the tree about six months of cool weather. The top will not grow much, but the roots will. When it starts to get warm in March and the tree responds and starts to grow, the roots are well established and will

be able to provide the water needed by all the new growth. **Now is the time to plant a tree or shrub.**

Benito Trevino Jr. is a botanist and Board member of the Native Plant Project. Benito and his wife Toni live on and run La Lomitas Ranch in Rio Grande City, Texas.

### **Purple Threeawn** *Aristida purpurea*



**Family: Poaceae**

**Tribe: Aristideae**

**Longevity: Perennial**

**Season: Warm**

**Origin: Native**

**Height: 35 - 80 cm**

**Flowers: May - Oct**

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[www.noble.org/imagegallery/Grasstml/](http://www.noble.org/imagegallery/Grasstml/)

Common along roadsides and occurs on a variety of soil types. It is similar in appearance to Oldfield threeawn but is weakly perennial and has glumes which are obviously unequal in length. Purple Threeawn has three awns stemming from a densely tufted seedhead that measures 1 1/2 to 1 3/4 inches long. It stands roughly fourteen to thirty-one inches in height. Long hairs at the margin of the collar and the single stems of this plant help to tell it from other threeawns. Its habitat consist of sandy or clay soils of the Edwards Plateau and South Texas Plains. Livestock may utilize this plant prior to the formation of seedheads, but for the most part it has poor economic value for both wildlife and livestock.

## **Turk's Cap Brightens the Moist Understory.**

*by William MacWhorter*

Turk's Cap is a bright-flowered delight to hummingbirds, butterflies and to us. *Malvaviscus drummondii*, its botanical name, honors Scottish naturalist Thomas Drummond. Drummond was sent by the Glasgow Botanical Society as a plant explorer in Texas during 1833-34.

After two years of plant collecting in the area between Galveston and the Edwards Plateau, he sailed to Cuba, where he died in Havana in 1835.

Turk's Cap was one of over 750 species of plants collected by Drummond during his stay in Texas.

The popular name Turk's Cap was given because of the similarity of the shape of its seed-pod (see photo on page 5) to that of a Sultan's Turban. In England, the plant was sometimes called Scotsman's Purse, because its petals remained closed.

This thornless shrub may become more than six feet tall when it grows in moist places in Cameron and Hidalgo Counties. It is also occasionally found in the wild from Central Texas to Florida. It prefers hammocks in Florida, where it receives 50 or more inches of annual rainfall.

In the delta of the Rio Grande, with an average of less than 25 inches of annual rainfall, it does well in shady, moist locations.

Turk's Cap has downy leaf blades with angular lobes. Petals are usually bright red, but white-flowered and pink-flowered forms are sometimes found.

In most other Malvaceae, flower petals spread apart. In this genus they do not spread, but cluster around emerging stamens and styles.

Here the hummingbirds assemble to dart and dance around the bright red blossoms.

Grow Turk's Cap in your garden's shady places. Its easy to establish and maintain, and you will enjoy your dashing visitors.

William MacWhorter: Past Board Member of the Native Plant Project, retired city planner and Valley resident for many years who has done extensive research in historical restoration and mapping in areas between the Atlantic Coast and New Mexico.

Editor's Note. Turk's Cap plants and some of the "dashing visitors" that utilize this plant. Plant flower, seed structure, and Blue Dasher dragon fly images by Stan Sterba, Glassy-winged Skipper butterfly by Greg R. Homel; and buff-bellied hummingbird by R.A. Behrstock. Images by Homel and Behrstock are copyrighted.



Buff-bellied Hummingbird

*Amazilia yucatanensis*



Glassy-winged skipper *Xenophanes tryxus*



Blue Dasher dragonfly *Pachydiplax longipennis*



Turk's Cap, so named because of the shape of the fruit. *Malviscus drummondii*



## **Nature Happenings in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas**

### **MISSION BUTTERFLY FESTIVAL – 2004**

The Mission, Texas Chamber of Commerce is having its seventh annual butterfly festival **October 14-17, 2004**. For a listing of events and registration information call **1-800-580-2700**, or visit the Mission Chamber of Commerce, 220 East Ninth Street, Mission, Texas

### **WILD IN WILLACY, Raymondville – 2004**

The Raymondville & Port Mansfield, Willacy County, Texas Chambers of Commerce are having their annual nature festival entitled “Boot Fest” **October 29-30, 2004**. For a listing of events and registration information call **1-888-603-6994**, or visit the Raymondville Historical & Community Center, 427 South Seventh Street, Raymondville, Texas.

### **RIO GRANDE VALLEY, BIRDING FESTIVAL, Harlingen – 2004**

The Harlingen, Texas, Chamber of Commerce is having its ninth annual Birding/Nature festival **November 10-14, 2004**. For a listing of events and registration information call **1-800-531-7346**, or visit the Harlingen Chamber of Commerce, 311 East Tyler, Harlingen, Texas.

**Texas State Park Tours/ World Birding Center, Mission, Texas**— Lomitas Ranch Tours and other natural area tours 7:30 a.m. – 5 p.m. every Tuesday and Friday from Benson Rio Grande State Park/World Birding Center in Mission, TX. Outings focus on native plants and their uses. Fees: \$25 per person: reservations required - call 956-519-6448. Or go to [www.worldbirdingcenter.org](http://www.worldbirdingcenter.org)

**Sabal Palm Grove Sanctuary**— Native plant presentation and tour by Joseph Krause – every weekday at 10 a.m. Pre-registration required – call 956-541-8034.

**Laguna Atascosa NWR**— Nature BIKE RIDES on Saturdays from 8 a.m. - 10:30 a.m. and Nature WALKS, Sundays from 8 a.m. - 10 a.m. Call for details: 956-748-3607.

**Santa Ana NWR**— Tram Tours will resume November 29<sup>th</sup>. Fees: \$3 for adults and \$1 for 12 years-old and under. Guided Nature WALKS are available. Call for details: 956-787-3079.



**The Sabal is the Newsletter of the Native Plant Project and conveys information on the native habitats, 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 @ 956-425-4005, or g\_lester48@msn.com. See past Sabals 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 Gene Lester @ 956-425-4005 or g\_lester48@msn.com

**Native Plant Project Meetings** – October 26, 2004; **Board meeting** at 6:30 pm; **General meeting** at 7:30pm featuring: Frank Wiseman from Harlingen, TX will present the program “Transforming a grassy yard into a TX certified Wildlife Habitat”.

**Board and General meeting dates 2004**– November 23.

**Board only meeting dates 2004**– December 28 (canceled).

**Native Plant Rescue:** The Valley Nature Center will rescue native plants about to be dug-up by construction companies and developers. Call 956-969-2475.

**HIGHLIGHTS OF THE NPP BOARD MEETING ON SEPTEMBER 28:** Chris Hathcock announced the grand opening on Oct. 23-24 of the World Birding Headquarters next to Bentsen State Park and asked for volunteers to show visitors around the native landscape. A volunteer is also needed to teach about edible wild plants at La Sal del Rey NWR on Oct. 23. Contact him at [chris.hathcock@tpwd.state.tx.us](mailto:chris.hathcock@tpwd.state.tx.us) if you can help with either of these events. Sue Griffin is organizing a plant rescue near the Port of Harlingen in the near future. If you can help, contact her at [sue\\_griffin@sbcglobal.net](mailto:sue_griffin@sbcglobal.net).

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