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# The Sabal

**www.nativeplantproject.org**

## Xeriphytes of the Arroyo Colorado Brush

*by Christina Mild*

Summer 2006 was hot, dry and windy, leaving many un-watered areas in local nature parks and preserves in pitiable condition.

Human preference for plants with large leaves, conspicuous or large blooms, and copious fruit appear to determine what is planted in many wildlife-attracting gardens. Many of these gorgeous plants, Pigeonberry, Mexican Trixis, Heartleaf Hibiscus, Potato Tree, Tropical Sage, etc. are conspicuous in remote brushy areas only when moisture is plentiful. In hard times, they wither back, returning rapidly when rain returns.

Great joy and hope can be found in examining dry tracts of brush for plants which withstand xeric conditions in great form. Several of these plants, being especially thorny, difficult to propagate and painful to extract in plant rescue attempts, are rarely found in revegetation plots wherever extant colonies are too remote for seed to spread by natural means.

Each of these stiff and thorny plants is ideal for critter protection, including nest building. Each also plays a multitude of roles in providing fruit, nectar and other products useful to wildlife. In my opinion, they exhibit rare beauty.

This article will concentrate on *Koeberlinia spinosa*. Since backing my behind into an armed branch-tip, I call it the living hypodermic needle. I've chosen this plant for greatest elaboration as it's quite rare in the brushy places one normally visits. The specimens I'm aware of on publicly open trails might number less than 20. There's a large, ancient specimen near the Visitor Center at Laguna Atascosa, though I find it less beautiful than others remote from water faucets.

The most distinctive feature of a healthy Koeberlinia specimen is stiff green spines, and not much else. Just following rain, these strong beautiful spines will bear many tiny green leaves, which one only notes upon careful examination.

Koeberlinia butterfly on flowering *Koeberlina spinosa*

Blooming occurs throughout the year when moisture is adequate. Blooms are delicate and beautiful. A most unusual feature of the plant is the blooms' aroma, which differs amazingly from time to time. Following the hottest dry seasons, probably fall, these innocent-looking blooms emit a noxious odor of carrion (rotting flesh). I've searched for carcasses in our wild piece of Arroyo Colorado brush, intent on remote disposal, only to find Koeberlinia in bloom. This scent attracts droves of pollinating flies; a probable location for checking off flycatchers on a birding list.

In cooler, wetter weather, a sweet and pleasant scent wafts from the innocent blooms, and the pollinating visitors are quite different: butterflies and myriad smaller insects.

Dr. Richard Hoverson, recently deceased, pointed out that Koeberlinia is a poor choice for planting upwind of a porch swing or picnic table, for anyone other than a family of vultures.

**Distinctive features of the very thorny:**

*Koeberlinia spinosa* (green puncturing spines, tiny round black fruit, tiny pale yellow blooms)

Blooming and fruiting *Ziziphus obtusifolia*

*Ziziphus obtusifolia*, (Clepe, Lotebush, Gumdrop Bush) (striations on blue/grey bark, copious leaves obscure thorns after rain, leaves frequently show signs of animal browsing, fruit ranges from sweet-tasting to fishy, leaves absent during drought, pale yellow-green blooms) Locals often tolerate this plant in yards, even along city fence rows, especially in corners.

*Castela erecta* (Althorn Goatbush, Amargosa) quarter-inch long narrow, stiff leaves always present, often pressed against the thorny

*Castela erecta,* Amargosa blooming

branches. Plant appears leaf-less from a distance. The shiny leaves are extremely bitter, thus "amar"gosa. Dark fruit is sometimes as large as cranberries, and is similar in color. Fruit is bitter, but tolerable. Extremely valuable plant for the treatment of dysentery, in that an extract has been proven to paralyze protozoan parasites. Tiny blooms are exquisite: coral-tinted petals with yellow sexual parts. Flowering occurs throughout the rain and following rain. Flower

*Castela erecta,* Amargosa fruiting

and fruit may occur simultaneously, a sight of extraordinary beauty.

It's easy to see why animals would choose to hide and nest in the complex, thorny maze of such plants. The stark angles and beauty these plants retain in the worst of seasons keeps each of them near to my wild-loving heart.

Christina Mild hold a MS degree in botany. She may be contacted at www.riodeltawild.com

*Castela erecta*, Amargosa appressed leaves during drought

## The Sabal Palm

*by Martin Hagne*

The Rio Grande Valley is known for many things such as its wonderful culture, charm, and nature. There is also a tree that one can include under any of those items when they are brought up. It lines the streets, neighborhoods, and old dusty farm roads thoughtout the Valley. It is part of our culture, charm and nature. I am, of course, talking about a palm tree, and you see them everywhere in the Valley.

But when it comes to which palm tree, there is only one choice for me: the Sabal Palm, also known as Texas Sabal or Mexican Sabal. The Sabal Palm, *Sabal mexicana*, is the only native palm to the Valley. In fact, there are only two native palms to all of Texas. The other native Texan palm is the Dwarf Palmetto which grows in the southeastern part of the state.

All the other palm species you see are exotic to our area and brought here. Even the one we see so much along our highways is not native. The Texas Department of Transportation plants the Washingtonian palms presumably because they grow faster. The one problem with that species and others brought here are that they are not freeze tolerant, whereas our Sabal can handle our periodic freezes without harm.

It is true that the Sabal is a rather slow grower, and it does not reach the heights of the Washingtonian either. It can easily take thirty years, or more, for a Sabal to reach a mature height of maybe forty (40) feet. Depending on its water source, it can grow a bit faster, but is never a rapid grower. The two species do look similar and, unless the Washingtonian is full grown and therefore much taller, can be tough to tell apart. The main differences are in the leaf structure. The Sabal Palm has a smooth edge along the petiole (the long stalk growing out from the palm trunk to the leafy part), whereas the Washingtonian has sharp de-curved thorn like structures all along this section. Word of caution though... older Washingtonians lose these with age. Another difference in the leaf is that the Sabal's petiole grows continually through the leaf to the tip, while the Washingtonian's petiole stops where the leaf starts. The Sabal's leaves also curve downwards, while the Washingtonian's are straight. The Sabal has seed that are the size of marbles, while the Washingtonian has small ball-bearing sized seed.

Our palm was once very common in the Valley, especially along the river and resacas. It was not limited to the eastern part of the Valley but grew on both sides of the river from Brownsville up into Hidalgo County. It is said that there were at least 40,000 acres of Sabal Palm forest before the turn of the last century. Today there are maybe 500 acres left remaining wild, mostly within the protection of the Sabal Palms Audubon Sanctuary in Brownsville. If you haven't visited there to see what a palm forest looks like, I strongly suggest you make the trip soon. So what happened to all the palms in the Valley? Most were cut down soon after the turn of the century to be used mostly as river dock pilings for the newly created and thriving steamboat industry that delivered goods from the mouth of the river all the way up to Starr County. These palms had been an important part of the local culture for centuries. Not only were they very important for wildlife that used them for nesting, but to humans. The seeds were a food source, the leaves and petiole made great fiber, and larger leaves were used for weaving baskets and other useful items.

If you can allow the palm some time to grow, it will be a beautiful addition to your landscape. It is a thicker trunked palm with more of a shape to the crown, making it, at least to me, a more attractive palm. It is also a very long-lived palm which will be around for many generations. It is a very important wildlife tree which harbors

nesting opportunities for Hooded Orioles, Barn Owls, and many other species. The old palms that die are excavated by woodpeckers, which in turn leave their holes for Eastern Screech-Owls and wild Red-crowned Parrots and Green Parakeets. Who wouldn't want those nesting in their backyard! It is best to leave the old dead leaves hanging as these create the perfect wildlife habitat. Oh, and yes, they do attract bats! Bats are another very important part of nature without which we would be infested with harmful insects and mosquitoes. And, no, bats are not as dangerous as everyone says! Maybe that will be the next column! Until then, plant a Sabal Palm and enjoy your labor for years to come. Martin Hagne is President of the NPP and Director of the Valley Nature Center, Weslaco, TX

## Sabal Grove

When you walk the narrow pathways
See the hidden treasures there –
Turk's Cap bright within the thicket
Beckons you to linger where

Purple blooming low Justicia
Carpets ground with tender leaves
Snake-eyes stare through eyes yet sightless
Underneath the Sabal trees

Lift your feet and place them gently
Least you Tread on tender things
Nightbirds may with luck escape you –
Fragile plants aren't blessed with wings

Sit in silence on a down log
Let the tortoise pass in peace
Listen to the Ground Dove's whisper
And the distant cry of geese.
– *William MacWhorter*

Native Plant Rescue: **The Valley Nature Center** will rescue native plants about to be destroyed by construction companies, developers, or no longer wanted by home owners. Call 956-969-2475.

**Exclusively Native plant sources:**
Benito Trevino, Landscaper/Grower, Rio Grande City 956-487-4626
Valley Nature Center – Native Plants, Weslaco 956-969-2475
Mother Nature's Creations, Harlingen 956-428-4897
Heep's Nursery, Harlingen 956-457-6834

## Nature Happenings in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, 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 Bentson 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

**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. Or go to www.tx.audubon.org/centers/sabal

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

**Santa Ana NWR**— Tram Tours of the park. Fees: $3 for adults and $1 for 12 years-old and under. Guided Nature WALKS are available. Call for details: 956-784-7500.

**Edinburg Scenic Wetlands and World Birding Center —** Native Plant Landscaping Series 1p.m. - 4 p.m. Nov. 18, Dec. 9, Jan. 6 & 20. Fee: $5 members, $7 non-members. 714 Raul Longoria Rd., Edinburg, TX (956) 381-9922.

**Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park & World Birding Center — Butterfly Walk** every Wednesday, 1:30-3:30 p.m. 2800 Bentsen Palm Drive, Mission, TX (956) 584-9156.

**Quinta Mazatlan - McAllen Wing of the World Birding Center— Thursday "Evening Explorations"** September to November. 6:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. $3.00. **Sunday "Family Excursions"** Sept. – Dec. 3:00 pm to 4:30 pm. $2.00 adults and $1.00 seniors and children. 600 Sunset Ave., McAllen, TX (956) 688-3370.

**Frontera Audubon, Weslaco Texas - Bird walks led by Cliff Stewart every Wednesday morning.** Frontera is a fifteen-acre nature preserve located at 1101 South Texas Boulevard in Weslaco, TX. Please meet Cliff on the deck of Frontera's Visitor's Center at 9am to participate. Entry fees to the preserve are $3.00 per adult and $1.00 per child. (956) 968-3275.

**Valley Nature Center, Weslaco, Texas - Kids' Nature Club.** Join the Valley Nature Center and the Estero Llano Grande State Park for their new Kid's Nature Club. The first Saturday of each month December 2006 through May 2007. Call 956-969-2475 to register and for more info.

**Christmas Bird Counts '06-'07.** There are twelve CBC's in the LRGV; all need your help in counting birds from mid-December 2006 and early January 2007. Call Martin at the VNC for more info at 956-969-2475.

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 *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.

Name_____

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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 G. Lester @ 956-425-4005 or g_lester48@msn.com

Native Plant Project Meetings – November 28, 2006. **Board meeting** at 6:30 pm; G**eneral meeting** at 7:30pm featuring: Karen Chapman, Wildlife Analyst with the Environmental Defense Fund, will present "Opportunities to restore brushland on privately owned farm and ranchland". Karen will describe federal and non-profit agency incentive programs to bring back the endangered ocelot and other native creatures to the Valley.

No meetings in December - Happy Holidays!

| **Board and General Meetings 2006:** | **Board and General Meetings 2007:** | |
|---|---|---|
| September 26 | January 23 | April 24 |
| October 24 | February 27 | May 22 |
| November 28 | March 27 | |

**SUMMARY OF THE MINUTES OF THE BOARD MEETING - October 24, 2006**
Plant sales at the Texas Butterfly Festival were good despite low attendance and bad weather. Plans were discussed for the celebration in April 2007 of the 25th Anniversary of the NPP. The Board discussed obtaining a retractable show banner for the NPP booth at festivals.

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