



The Sabal

www.nativeplantproject.org

LRGV Winter Wildscaping; Berries in the Brush

by Christina Mild

Introduction: Notes on Winter Wildscaping.

Cool, breezy winter days in the LRGV bring the opportunity to work outdoors without heat-stroke and dehydration. What a refreshing change from endless summer and sweat-drenched clothing!

Early winter is a wonderful time to plants things. But even now, new transplants may wilt rapidly, including the most xeric of leafy species. Low rainfall during winter is typical for us, while drying wind and sunny days are also predictable.

Winter is a great time to improve the moisture-retaining layer of mulch around your favorite native plants. Bags of treasure (fallen leaves) begin to appear curb-side in residential neighborhoods. Leaves are one of the best sources of mulch available to us. They decompose quickly, if a sufficiently thick layer of them is applied and adequate moisture is

available. Rainwater transforms leaves into the magical, marvelous wonder we call topsoil or humus. If the weather doesn't cooperate, providing your own shower will help to keep leaves in place wherever wind might carry them aloft.

To discourage the growth of whatever might be invasive in your garden, and to retain soil moisture, a thick layer of wet newspaper is easy to apply and available at no cost. Seeds which lie below the newsprint should begin to mold, rather than germinate. Those which germinate should perish, as sunlight essential to growth has been blocked. A top dressing of leaves, wood-chip mulch, grass-clippings, or hay is essential, as newsprint cannot be described as beautiful, except, perhaps, to the newspaper's editor.

Another winter task is trimming dead seed-head from fall-bloomers like *Trixis inula* and *Chromolaena odorata* (*Eupatorium odoratum*). These fall bloomers can be trimmed back, making room for something else to grow.

Now is the time to turn our attention to species which bear winter fruit. Most of us have Barbados Cherry, Turk's Cap, Pigeonberry, or Anacua. Each of these bears some fruit during



Brush Holly new growth

winter if moisture is adequate. In wild areas, Granjeno and Berlandier's Wolfberry are in fruit also. Watering, an application of mulch and fertilizer may enhance fruit production.

One of our best winter-berry producers is unique to extreme southern Texas. Perhaps because it does not occur elsewhere in the U.S., little has been published regarding this exquisite plant.

Brush Holly. Coronillo. Huichichiltemel. *Xylosma flexuosa*.

Brush Holly bears fruit consistently during winter. Small yellow berries ripen from red to black, and these are actually quite tasty. Apparently they are not poisonous, as the author has consumed them for many years. In Central America, the plant is used in some fashion as a remedy for tuberculosis. It is probably more effective in chasing off the winter doldrums.

Some specimens bear few thorns, others bear many, and the thorns may be an inch in length. At least they're not recurved. Given adequate space, Brush Holly is a wonderful plant for the south Texas yard. It is evergreen, with shiny leaves, and quite attractive.

In extreme southern Texas, in areas of more-or-less intact brush, one might encounter Brush Holly in palm groves, along Resaca banks, in brush thickets or on clay lomas. Specimens have been encountered as far north along the coast as Nueces County. Collection sites in Mexico and Central America range in elevation from 0 – 2300 ft.

Propagation is by means of seed or softwood cuttings. The plant does well in cultivation. It may be slow to become established, after which it may grow rapidly to maximum height of 20 ft, more typically about 10 ft. The Native Plant Project's Shrub Handbook recommends a well-drained location in shade to full sun. Once established, the plant is drought tolerant. Unisexual blooms may occur on separate plants; thus gardeners should plant more than one specimen if fruiting is desired.



Brush Holly thorns



Brush Holly female flowers

A search on Brush Holly brings little in the way of information, even on the world-wide web. The most understandable published reference is written by Robert A. Vines in Trees, Shrubs & Woody Vines of the Southwest (1960. See pg. 763.) Dr. Vines' description uses a synonymous name: *Xylosma blepharodes*.

Botanical names for this species are far more confusing than common names, as 42 synonyms have been employed by botanists, who have been making collections and publishing scholarly descriptions of the plant since 1825.

In Mexico and Central America, several species of the genus *Xylosma* occur. In the U.S.,

Xylosma flexuosa is the single known member of an entire family, Flacourtiaceae.

Texas Parks & Wildlife Entomologist Mike Quinn located one record of butterfly host plant among Flacourtiaceae by a species native to Mexico but not yet recorded in the U.S., Itus Leafwing (*Zaretis itus*), which ranges through Bolivia, Brazil and Guyanas. On the web, one finds photos of this leaf-wing-like butterfly (taken in Peru by local photographers Richard Lehman and Kim Garwood).

Characteristics ascribed to Flacourtiaceae are confusing beyond this author's comprehension, which might explain why botanists have ascribed the plant a sundry assortment of nomenclature.

There is no confusion regarding usefulness to wildlife. Birds consume the pretty winter berries, borne on lithe and thorny branches affording year-round protection from climbing predators. The only confusion lies in how many specimens you might wish to plant and where they might grow best.

Mike Heep recalls a territorial mockingbird in Dr. Richard Hoverson's fruiting Brush Holly. "It wasn't afraid of people," Heep remarks. "I could've gotten close enough to whack it with a broom!"

Christina Mild, M.S. Biological Science (email: mild.christina@gmail.com)



Brush Holly fruit

Habitat Diversity is Key

by Martin Hagne

We are truly blessed to live in an area that is best described as the most biodiverse area of our country. Nowhere else in North America can you find the number of bird and butterfly species in such a small area. Within the four-county area we call the Valley we have more bird species, 512 to be exact, than all other entire states except for California, Arizona, and Florida. The whole state of New Mexico has about the same amount as we do here in our small area. With over 330 species of butterflies, we have about half of the nation's total number! We might not have the large mammals, such as elk and grizzlies, but we have an enormous amount of smaller mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and insects. And the list goes on and on. Some of those large animals are only missing now because of habitat loss. Mountain lions, antelope, black bear, bison, and even jaguars were once fairly common in some of our area. Depending on who you talk to, we have somewhere around 1,500 native plants species. Some estimates list that number closer to 3,000.

Birders and nature watchers have long known this fact, including the father of modern bird watching, the late Roger Tory Peterson. Mr. Peterson made many visits to the Valley and even left a signed endorsement of the Valley Nature Center on one of his trips. So why is it that such natural diversity exists right here? There are several answers to that question, but they all have to do with one theme. That theme is habitat and the diversity thereof. We are located in an area that has several major natural regions and other eco factors that converge right here.

First of all, the Valley is located pretty much in the middle between the eastern and the western halves of the country. This allows us to receive influences of both regions, at least at times. Especially during strong winds and other weather patterns, we can see birds normally seen much further west, or east, depending on the direction of the weather pattern. Birds at times get lost for different reasons and we are here in the middle to catch them.

Then there are the major influences from the four very specific natural regions of the North, South, East, and West. The South brings us subtropical species at the very northern limits of their ranges, and a warm climate. The North extends the short grass prairie with its unique inhabitants. The West allows the more arid desert species to exist here as well. Then there is the ocean and the coastal prairies that come from the East. The gulf brings us pelagic birds and mammals not found on land. We are sandwiched in between these four major regions and our natural heritage benefits immensely from that fact.

Right down the middle of the Valley comes two major continental migratory bird flyways. Each spring and fall, millions of birds migrate from their wintering homes down south to their summer homes up north, and vice versa. The Mississippi and the Central flyways both meet up here and funnel birds through our area. Some of these birds move right through and can only be seen for some weeks each year, while others stay for the winter or the summer, depending on the species. A few butterfly and dragonfly species also migrate.

That brings us to the last and equally important habitat situation creating our rich biodiversity. There are eleven different and specific biotic communities within our four county area. This might be interpreted differently by different biologists. But the basic idea is the same. These biotic communities are areas that have slight differences, or at times major differences, in their plant species. You might not be able to walk from one to another and see a huge difference right away, but trained eyes can detect plant species changing along the way. Some areas are vastly different, such as the dunes of Boca Chica beach and the Mid-Delta thorn forest in the mid Valley. Some plant communities harbor species found nowhere else in the U.S., like the Barretal in Starr County with its Barreta trees found along a short stretch of US 83 just east of Rio Grande City. What does all that really mean? Different animal species rely on different plant species or communities of species. The more plant and habitat diversity, the more animal species are found in an area.

Famous naturalist John Muir once wrote: "When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world." This is easily demonstrated in the natural world, where one small example out of many millions is the female Silver-banded Hairstreak butterfly, which will only lay her eggs on the leaves of the Balloon Vine. Remove the Balloon Vine from a habitat and this most beautiful and delicate hairstreak has no chance of continuing its life cycle. So intricately related, or dependent upon each other, are species in nature that when man changes only one of those species, often all the others are

affected in an adverse way. Imagine what our Valley once was! But for now, let's strive to understand and protect what we have today.

We are the most biodiverse region in this country. Now you know why. And I ask you to please do your all to keep it that way! Enjoy nature for all it has to offer, and revel in its beauty and magnificent intricacies. Learn to understand its importance and therefore guard its future.

Martin Hagne is President of the NPP and Director of the Valley Nature Center, Weslaco, TX

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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.

Nature Happenings

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: \$4 for adults, \$3.50 for seniors 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. 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” January, February and March. 6:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. \$3.00. 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 9 am 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 - Natural History Series. January, February and March. Every Saturday at 10 a.m. Fee: \$3.00. 301 S. Boarder Avenue, Weslaco TX. Call 956-969-2475 to register and for more info.



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 @ 956-425-4005, or g_lester48@msn.com.**

See *The Sabal* and our 5 handbooks on our website:

www.nativeplantproject.org

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Your 2007 annual membership is due. Please renew by using the membership form below.

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

Native Plant Project Meetings – January 23, 2007. **Board meeting** at 6:30 p.m.; **General meeting** at 7:30 p.m. Christina Mild will present “Native Vines of the Rio Grande Valley”. The program will include many gorgeous photographs and information on where individual vines are found in the wild, their use by wildlife, cultivation and possible use in local landscaping.

Board and General Meetings 2007:

January 23
February 27
March 27

April 24
May 22

Board and General Meetings 2007:

September 25
October 23
November 27

SUMMARY OF THE MINUTES OF THE BOARD MEETING - November 28, 2006

Plant sales at the Texas Butterfly Festival and the RGV Nature Festival totaled \$845.25. Lester has donated the cost of the brass labels on the 25th Anniversary Plaque. A committee consisting of Griffin, Lester, and Mosimann will work on designing a show display for the NPP to use at festivals.

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