



The Sabal

FROG FRUIT

by Toni Trevino

“Hi! I’m Toni, Benito’s wife.” That’s how I normally introduce myself when I find myself in a group of environmentalists or naturalists. You may well imagine that Benito has taught me almost everything I know about native plants. As we take walks together, I often ask Benito to identify this or that plant. What may surprise you, however, is how frequently he is unable to identify “ground covers.” I’m sure there are lots of different definitions of “ground cover.” As for me, I think of them as low lying spreading plants. Grasses are included as ground covers, as

are most wild flowers. For some time now, I have thought that it would be nice if I focused on the identification of ground covers. Who knows, maybe I can teach Benito a few things about native plants that he doesn’t know. When I first mentioned to Benito that I was interested in writing articles on ground covers, he suggested “frog fruit” for my first ground cover article. So here goes....

Have you ever seen a plant a hundred times and never really noticed it? That’s the way it was for me with frog fruit. Although I’m sure I had seen it hundreds of times, I first noticed it when I went for a walk with some friends in early spring in an old neighborhood in McAllen. It had been

a particularly dry winter and the spring was starting dry as well. The yards needed rain. In many of them, the grass was dying if not dead. I recall there was no grass in one yard near the sidewalk, only a short insignificant little plant that initially appeared to be mainly intertwined stems spreading along the ground. What caught my attention, however, was that this grassless yard was teeming with tiny butterflies of all different kinds. Then I noticed the tiny flower which seemed to be irresistible to the butterflies. What I was looking at was the flower of the frog fruit.

The center of the flower looks like a burnt match head. Although the center may initially appear brown, if you look closer, you'll see it is actually a deep, almost iridescent purple. The five petals, which are typically white, are around the base of the "match head" structure.

If I were a botanist, I would tell you that frog fruit is in the family Verbenaceae. Other members of Verbenaceae include lantana, vitex, verbena, and teak. It is hard to imagine that a plant such as frog fruit which typically grows three to five inches tall is related to the teak tree whose wood is highly sought after for outdoor furniture. There are two species of frog fruit that grow in South Texas, *Phyla incisa* and *Phyla nodiflora*. The common name for *Phyla incisa* is "sawtooth frog fruit." Sawtooth frog fruit has slender leaves 1/2 to 1 3/4 inches long with serrated edges along the upper 3/4 of the blade. The common names for *Phyla nodiflora* include "turkey tangle" and "common frog fruit." Common frog fruit has broader leaves of the

same length, also with serrated edges. Both sawtooth frog fruit and common frog fruit are perennials which may be slightly woody at the base.

Common frog fruit is the species which grows wild here on Rancho Lomitas. Here at the ranch, the frog fruit grows down in the ramadero on the bottom and sides of a dry arroyo. During the middle of the long hot summers, it virtually disappears. But after the first rains that end the canicula, the frog fruit puts out leaves and starts to bloom. During October, the frog fruit is literally teeming with butterflies enjoying its sweet nectar. Not only do various butterflies use frog fruit as a nectar plant, it is the host plant for the phaon crescent, the white peacock, and the common buckeye (which is anything but common in my book). In addition to attracting butterflies, the leaves of the frog fruit are eaten by feral hogs, white-tailed deer, javelinas, and cattle.

If you would like to plant some frog fruit in your yard or butterfly garden, it is relatively easy to establish. I would recommend transplanting healthy green plants during the spring or fall. (Not much does well here when transplanted in the heat of the summer.) Frog fruit does well in a variety of soils and requires little care after it is established. A couple of years ago I put in a bed of frog fruit in our butterfly garden at the house. We are cursed with clay soils here, so before planting, I loosened the soil and added some sand and soil conditioner. Then I took cuttings off some of Benito's frog fruit that was growing in pots in the nursery. Each cutting was

approximately six to ten inches long and was taken from the green, not woody, part of the stems. I planted the cuttings about eight inches apart covering the nodes with a small amount of soil. I then kept the soil moist until the frog fruit had a chance to put out some new roots. The frog fruit will grow into a mat with the stems reaching as long as three feet. Just remember,

frog fruit should not be mowed and generally does not need to be fertilized. As a matter of fact, too much fertilizer can kill your frog fruit. Let me know how your bed turns out!

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



Photo courtesy of Stan O. Sterba

Common Frog Fruit *Phyla nodiflora*

Texas Department of Agriculture Announces: List of Noxious Plants

by *Jesús Franco*

The passage of Senate Bill 854 by the 78th Texas Legislature in 2003, amended the Texas Agriculture Code, §71.151, and mandated the establishment of a noxious plant list. Through proposed section §19.300 the Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA) has produced a list of noxious plant species that have “serious potential to cause economic or ecological harm to the state”(see Table).

The list was filed with the Office of the Secretary of State on October 18, 2004 and should become effective sometime in early January, 2005. The importance of this new regulation resides in the fact that, unless permitted by Texas Parks and Wildlife (TPW) or TDA “a person commits an offense under the Texas Agriculture Code if the person sells, distributes or imports into the state the plants listed in any live form.”

Worth noting here is that “For the purpose of this section, the term “distributes” does not include the accidental or unintentional movement of noxious plant material in the course of legitimate construction activities or agricultural activities, including but not limited to, re-seeding, transportation of agricultural products and the movement of farm or earth moving equipment.”

My colleagues in Austin informed me that this list started because of the funding that was being allocated to fight salt cedar infestations in West Texas and the fact that people could still go into

a nursery and purchase salt cedar plants. The current list was put together by compiling an already existing list, TPW’s list of prohibited invasive aquatic plants, and plants listed as noxious under TDA’s seed quality regulations.

The idea was to keep the list simple, with some major problem plants so that it could get through the legislature. This has generated some discussion as to why some species made the list while others did not. Amongst others, well-known problem plants such as Brazilian peppertree (*Schinus terebinthifolius*) and water hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*) are listed, whereas species like Chinaberry (*Melia azedarach*) and buffelgrass (*Cenchrus ciliaris*) are not.

I was very surprised to see that balloon vine (*Cardiospermum halicacabum*), a plant locally promoted as a good landscaping native plant and wildlife provider, is now considered a plant that has “serious potential to cause economic or ecological harm to the state.” Some consider balloon vine a problematic plant in agricultural settings.

Therefore, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. As long as alternative, profit-making, native species are not further promoted it is probably in the best interest of the Legislature not to upset the agriculture, horticulture, ranching, and other industries over a few “bad plants”.

Much work remains to be done on the daunting task of producing a comprehensive list of prohibited species that does not alienate different interest groups. An official State Invasive Species Council made up of

resource-based members is in the making. The creation of this entity will allow better work coordination, better management of scientific and economic impact data, as well as the integration of Texas into national and international invasive species networks.

Comments related to the list may be submitted to David Kostroun, assistant commissioner for regulatory programs, Texas Department of Agriculture, P.O. Box 12847, Austin, Texas 78711.

Jesús Franco is an Urban Wildlife Biologist with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department located in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Jesus.Franco@tpwd.state.tx.us

Table Texas Agricultural Code §19.300(a). Noxious Plant List.

Common Name <i>Botanical Name</i>	Common Name <i>Botanical Name</i>
Alligatorweed <i>Alternanthera philoxeroides</i>	Kudzu <i>Pueraria montana</i> var. <i>Lobata</i>
Balloonvine <i>Cardiospermum halicacabum</i>	Lagarosiphon <i>Lagarosiphon major</i>
Brazilian peppertree <i>Schinus terebinthifolius</i>	Paperbark <i>Melaleuca quinquenervia</i>
Broomrape <i>Orobanche ramosa</i>	Purple loosestrife <i>Lythrum salicaria</i>
Camelthorn <i>Alhagi camelorum</i>	Rooted waterhyacinth <i>Eichhornia azurea</i>
Chinese tallow tree <i>Triadica sebiferum</i>	Saltcedar <i>Tamarix</i> spp.
Deeprouted sedge <i>Cyperus entrerianus</i>	Salvinia <i>Salvinia</i> spp.
Distaff thistle <i>Carthamus lanatus</i>	Serrated tussock <i>Nassella trichotoma</i>
Eurasian watermilfoil <i>Myriophyllum spicatum</i>	Torpedograss <i>Panicum repens</i>
Giant duckweed <i>Spirodela oligorrhiza</i>	Tropical soda apple <i>Solanum viarum</i>
Giant reed <i>Arundo donax</i>	Water spinach <i>Ipomoea aquatica</i>
Hedge bindweed <i>Calystegia sepium</i>	Water trumpet <i>Cryptocoryne beckettii</i>
Hydrilla <i>Hydrilla verticillata</i>	Waterhyacinth <i>Eichhornia crassipes</i>
Itchgrass <i>Rottboellia cochinchinensis</i>	Waterlettuce <i>Pistia stratiotes</i>
Japanese dodder <i>Cuscuta japonica</i>	

Now is a good time to plant and transplant most native plants. Not only will you improve the value of your property, you'll improve its "habitat value". Native plants attract and provide food and cover for all of our wonderful and diverse critters. The exotics don't.

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 487-4626

Valley Nature Center -- Native Plants, Weslaco 969-2475

Richard Holverson, Plants and Consulting, La Feria 797-2102

Mike Heep plants -- Wild Bird Center, Harlingen 428-2211

Mother Nature's Creations, Harlingen 428-4897

Frank Gonzales, Landscaper/Grower, Harlingen 412-2125

Nature Happenings in the Lower Rio Grande Valley Texas

Valley Arbor Month— February is All Valley Arbor Month. For more information on how you can participate call Laura at Valley Proud. 956-412-8004.

Monthly nature walks in Harlingen— Offered by Rio Grande Valley Chapter Master Naturalists. Tuesday, March 8th, 9:30 a.m. "Return to Ramsey." Enjoy the signs of spring in Harlingen's revegetated former landfill. Trees, shrubs, cacti and wildflowers should be in bloom throughout the park. Tour meets in Ramsey's parking lot at 9:30 a.m. Wear good walking shoes. Ramsey Nature Park is located south of Harrison St. and north of the arroyo bridge on Ed Carey Drive, Loop 499. Call Frank Wiseman at 364-1410 to reserve a spot.

Tuesday, April 12th, 9:30 a.m. "Birding at McKelvey Park." This will be a rather long hike, involving a bit of a descent and climb, to observe a wide array of places where a bird might linger. McKelvey Park is near the junction of Commerce Street and 77 Sunshine Strip. Be ready to begin the tour at the parking lot, at 9:30 a.m. Call Frank Wiseman at 364-1410 to reserve a spot.

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.

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.

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: 956-787-3079.

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

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 4 handbooks on the website. www.nativeplantproject.org

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Once again, its time to renew your membership

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

Native Plant Project Meetings – February 22, 2005; **Board meeting** at 6:30 pm; **General meeting** at 7:30pm featuring: Toni Trevino who will present the program “Cooking with Native Plants”. She’ll share with us how she makes delicious cookies and other goodies offered to tourists of her Rancho Lomitas in Rio Grande City, Texas.

Board and General Meeting 2005:

January 25 July 26
February 22 September 27
March 22 October 25
May 24 November 22

Board Meeting Only 2005:

April 26 August 23
June 28 December 27

Highlights of the NPP Board Meeting on January 25, 2005: Summary of the Minutes of the Native Plant Project Board Meeting January 25, 2005. The names of members will be listed in *The Sabal* when they pay dues. Sue Griffin designed plant I.D. tags that will be attached to plants sold at festivals. Besides common and scientific names, the tags have information on height, growth requirements, and attractiveness to birds and butterflies. Jim Everitt donated copies of his 2 native plant books to the NPP

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