Designing a “Texas Wildscape”

by Sue Griffin

My objective as a designer of "Texas Certified Wildscapes" is to have the visitor be surprised when told its a native-plant garden. Often the general public has a misconception of what a 'Wildscapes' will look like. That may come from the name, but a Wildscape does not have to be wild or untrimmed. The only criteria for a certified Texas Wildscape is that it must contain three elements: cover, food sources, and water. I will discuss only the first two elements in this article.

When I start a Wildscape, I first conceive a landscape that could contain any type of plant material. The elements of any landscape include beds, borders, hedges, and hardscapes. After discussing the needs, anticipated uses, and what animals the customer wants to attract, I start a design. First I layout the paths and the beds. Location of trees is next. I then add patios and seating areas. Only after these elements are finalized, do I start to decide on plant material.

When choosing native plants for the landscape, I want to have a variety of colors, textures, and heights. I want to have some shade plants and some that will thrive in the South Texas sun. The water needs of each plant must be considered. Plants that naturally occur together in nature are more likely to survive in the same location in a designed landscape. I also want to consider the wildlife the customer wants to attract. Remember, butterflies and birds may be the predominate and showier wildlife, but dragonflies, lizards, toads, and deer may be the target for others.

Over the years I have developed lists of native plants that serve multiple purposes. I have an extensive library of books on native plants; including all of the Native Plant Project handbooks. I have built my list based on information found in these books and nearly twenty years of designing gardens. I also rely on advice from other native plant gardeners and nurserymen.
I thought I might share some of my lists with you and discuss how I use these to develop my designs.

I initiate the plant design starting with 'hedges'. I use the term hedges here rather loosely – it includes closely planted rows of similar plants to divide one area from another or designate boundaries; as well as foundation plantings along buildings, and fences.

Fiddlewood is an excellent plant for hedging. It is easy to prune, grows into a dense impenetrable wall that offers food and cover for birds and nectar or food source for butterflies and their larvae. In addition, Fiddlewood is an attractive plant. The white flowers and vibrant orange clusters of berries outshine many non-native plants used in hedges. The same could be said for Whitebrush, not only are the airy white blooms attractive, they are quite fragrant. Whitebrush is best used against walls and fences as its branches have a tendency to spread out and down. Other native plants used for hedges are listed in List 1.

After deciding what plants to use for all of the hedges, I determine what plants I what in each bed. I use a single species for the border of each bed. This gives a cohesive appearance to the bed and yet sets it aside as a unique area in the garden. I often use a variety of species to fill wide beds with plants that will be a gradation of heights. For example, a bed that has a row of native Wedelia with a row of Velvet leaf Lantana directly behind it draws the eye into the garden. I also use native Wedelia under a foundation plantings of Drummond’s Turk’s Cap. In a shade garden, Runyon’s Waterwillow can be planted along the edge of a bed that contains Drummond's Turk’s Cap, Kidneywood and Pigeonberry. Gaura softens the edge of a bed that contains Shrubby Blue Sage, Sweet Stem, Lantana, and a very large Cortez Croton. See List 2 for additional plants I use for borders.

Shrubs are used throughout the landscape. Many shrubs have found a place in my landscapes. Often, like the Yellow Sophora, they are specimen plants - a species that has characteristics that set it aside from other plants and that deserves to be featured in a garden. A single Chapote that sits in a curve of a sidewalk, and a Cortez Croton that fills a corner of a fence are some of the specimens I feature in my gardens.

Other shrubs are desirable for their contribution to wildlife or, when grouped together, they call attention to themselves. Shrubby Blue Sage, Sweet Stem and Lantana are located on the south side of a front-yard garden. Specimen Chapote protects them from most afternoon sun and a Cortez Croton plus a wooden fence block the early morning sun. This semi-shade garden is where I have located a number of butterfly nectar plants. The Shrubby Blue Sage helps add height to the back of the garden and breaks up the monotony of the wooden fence. Lantana adds color most of the year, and the Sweet Stem adds a faint fragrance when it is in bloom. Other shrubs that I use in my designs can be found in List 3.

I combined Adelia, Golden Eye Daisy, and South Padre Island Mist Flower in a long bed that borders the parking lot at Ramsey Nature Park in Harlingen. The repetition of color, form and species is both pleasing to the eye and provides for ease of pollination. When planning gardens in public locations, my hope is that individuals can look at the garden and think, “I like this, I could do that at my house.”

Location, location, location! No matter what design I have in mind it is necessary to remember the soil type and sun and water needs of each species. I never want to give the illusion that gardening with native means no work; by choosing the right location, for the right plant, there will be less work. Native plants are already adapted to the soil type and weather conditions of the area; however, some native plants, when removed from their natural environment and placed in a tended garden can be difficult to grow. Heart-leaf Hibiscus, with its showy red flowers is one of those, I have found a few rules to follow that will help it survive. It is its happiest when placed in a well drained area where it receives only late afternoon sun. It thrives on benign neglect, but often has to be replaced about every three to five years.

Mexican Trixis is another plant that struggled in my garden until I moved it to a sunnier location under a Cedar Elm tree. Here it spread and bloomed prolifically last fall.

When planning any Wildscape, I always have to remember the desires of the customer. Many native plants are considered weeds by the normal homeowner and when planning a garden for a home I usually choose shrubs and perennials that do not have thorns, and will not become an
invasive plant. Invasive in this case meaning that it will spread faster than it can be controlled or produce an over abundance of seeds. One 'invasive' plant that I do suggest for homeowners who wish to attract the largest number of birds is sunflowers. It may mean removing numerous seedlings in the late winter, early spring, but the results are worth it. Migrating and wintering warblers feed on the seeds and insects that gather on the plants. One visitor to the Sunflowers that I always enjoy are the American Goldfinches. I enjoy their antics as the hang upside down to harvest sunflower seeds.

I hope that by sharing some of my designing methods, I might inspire you to try some of these combinations of plants and designs. Remember, A Wildscape is simply a garden that uses native plants to provide as much cover and food sources as possible for wildlife. Start an adventure: design your own Wildscape.

Sue Griffin, owner of Mother Nature's Creations, Harlingen, TX, is President of the Colorado Audubon Society and Board member of the Native Plant Project. For contact information see business card page 6.
### List 1. Unarmed plants used for hedges.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Name</th>
<th>Scientific Name</th>
<th>Landscape value</th>
<th>Animal attracted</th>
<th>Food</th>
<th>Cover</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White brush</td>
<td><em>Aloysia gratissima</em></td>
<td>Scent</td>
<td>Goldfinches &amp; warblers</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drummond’s Turk’s Cap</td>
<td><em>Malvaviscus drummondii</em></td>
<td>Red flower &amp; seeds, easily pruned</td>
<td>Butterflies, hummingbirds, birds eat seeds</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiddlewood</td>
<td><em>Citherexylum berlandieri</em></td>
<td>Dense growth &amp; shiny leaves, easily pruned</td>
<td>Allbirds eat the seeds</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purple Sage</td>
<td><em>Leucophyllum frutescens</em></td>
<td>Showy flowers, easily pruned</td>
<td>Theona Cheker spotted &amp; all birds attracted to seeds</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbados cherry</td>
<td><em>Malpighia glabra</em></td>
<td>Pink flowers, red seeds, easily pruned</td>
<td>White-patched, &amp; Brown-banded skippers, cassius blue butterfly; birds eat seeds</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas Torchwood</td>
<td><em>Amyris texana</em></td>
<td>Scent, structure of branches</td>
<td>Giant Swallowtail butterfly</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adelia</td>
<td><em>Adelia vaseyi</em></td>
<td>Structure and leaf color</td>
<td>Mexican Bluewing butterfly</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### List 2. Plants used as borders, along walkways and in beds.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Name</th>
<th>Scientific Name</th>
<th>Landscape value</th>
<th>Animal attracted</th>
<th>Food</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Runyon’s Waterwillow</td>
<td><em>Justicia runyonii</em></td>
<td>Likes shade, purple flower</td>
<td>Malachite, Banded Peacock</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mex. evening Primrose</td>
<td><em>Oenothera speciosa</em></td>
<td>Large pink flowers, early spring blooming, very low growing, spreads</td>
<td>Nectar source for all butterflies</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betony or South Padre Island Mistflower</td>
<td><em>Conoclinium</em> (Eupatorium) <em>betonicifolium</em></td>
<td>Long blooming, blue flowers, spreads</td>
<td>Rounded Metalmark, Nectar source for all butterflies</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wedelia or Orange Daisy</td>
<td><em>Wedelia</em> (Xexmenia) <em>hispida</em></td>
<td>Long and prolific bloomer, easy to maintain, seed source</td>
<td>Nectar source for all butterflies</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snake Herb</td>
<td><em>Dyaschoriste cremulata</em></td>
<td>Leaf color, blue flowers, easy to maintain</td>
<td>Nectar source for all butterflies</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### White Plumbago
- **Scientific Name**: Plumbago scandens
- Blooms late into the evening, takes shade well
- Marine & Cassius Blues butterflies
- Yes

### Gaura
- **Scientific Name**: Gaura sp.
- Blooms on stalks, flowers showy
- Nectar source for all butterflies

### Plains Coreopsis
- **Scientific Name**: Coreopsis tinctoria
- Colorful, long blooming when deadheaded
- Yes

### Pigeonberry
- **Scientific Name**: Rivina humilis
- Pink flowers followed by red fruit
- Seeds eaten by most birds
- Yes

### Tropical Sage
- **Scientific Name**: Salvia cocinea
- Flowers during all temperate seasons
- Seed eating birds, nectar source
- Yes

### Velvet Leaf Lantana
- **Scientific Name**: Lantana velutina
- Long blooming, white flowers, easily pruned
- Nectar source for all butterflies
- Yes

### List 3. Shrubs used as accent plants or to attract a particular wildlife species.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Name</th>
<th>Scientific Name</th>
<th>Landscape value</th>
<th>Animal attracted</th>
<th>Food</th>
<th>Cover</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sweet Stem</td>
<td>Aloysia macrostachya</td>
<td>Light airy plant with lavender blooms</td>
<td>Southern Dogface</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican Trixis</td>
<td>Trixis inula</td>
<td>Clusters of small yellow flowers, good to fill under trees</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow Sophora</td>
<td>Sophora tomentosa</td>
<td>Velvety leaves, large showy yellow flowers</td>
<td>Hummingbirds, warblers, and pollinators</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shrubby Blue Sage</td>
<td>Salvia ballotiflora</td>
<td>Easily pruned, light blue flowers</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brushy Lippia</td>
<td>Lippia alba</td>
<td>Pink blooms along slender stalks, good for damp areas</td>
<td>White Peacock, Lantana Scrub-Hairstreak</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas Lantana</td>
<td>Lantana horrida</td>
<td>Bright colors in most seasons</td>
<td>Nectar source for all butterflies, birds eat the seeds</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heart-Leaf Hibiscus</td>
<td>Hibiscus martianus (cardiophyllus)</td>
<td>Showy red flowers</td>
<td>Yojoa and mallow Scrub-Hairstreak</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guayacan</td>
<td>Guaiacum angustifolium</td>
<td>Delicate orchid like flowers</td>
<td>Lyside Sulph er</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby’s Bonnet</td>
<td>Coursetia axillaris</td>
<td>Stunning small pink flowers</td>
<td>Southern Dogface</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Golden Eye Daisy</td>
<td>Viguiera stenoloba</td>
<td>Large mounds of yellow flowers</td>
<td>Nectar source for all butterflies, birds eat the seeds</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Nature Happenings Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas

For a comprehensive calendar of Nature Happenings go to RGV Nature Coalition at www.rgvnaturecoalition.org Scroll down to and click on Nature Events Calendar on right side.

**Edinburg Scenic Wetlands and World Birding Center** — Birding, butterflies, caterpillars, bats, and photography programs, 714 Raul Longoria Rd., Edinburg, TX. Call Marisa (956) 381-9922 or go to www.edinburgwbc.org for schedule.

**Quinta Mazatlan - McAllen Wing of the World Birding Center** — 600 Sunset Ave., McAllen, TX. Call Colleen Hook (956) 688-3370 for scheduled events.

**Bentsen Rio Grande Valley State Park WBC** offers butterfly walks, bird walks, nature tours. Call 956-584-9156 for details and times.

**Santa Ana NWR** near Alamo offers **Nature Tram rides** with Interpreters at 9:30 a.m., 12 noon and 2:00 p.m. every day (956) 784-7500.

**Valley Nature Center** (956) 969-2475 301 S. Border Ave., Weslaco, TX.

**Estero Llano Grande State Park WBC** - 3301 International Blvd. (FM 1015) in Weslaco, TX. Call (956) 565-3919 for scheduled events.

**Valley Proud Environmental Council** Celebrate our 25th Anniversary by planting a native tree. 3 new planting guides available; call Laura Maxwell (956) 412-8004, vpec@sbcglobal.net or visit www.valleyproud.org.

**NEW:** At NPP meetings, you will now be able to purchase native plants grown at the Perez Ranch Nursery and VNC. It's Arbor Month in the Valley. Encourage birds and butterflies to stop at your backyard by growing their food: Native Plants.

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**MOTHER NATURE'S CREATIONS**

Native Landscapes  
Water Features, Ponds, Pond Supplies & Rock  
Specimen Size Native Plants  
Consulting or Full Installation

**Contact:**  
Sue Griffin  
Office: 956-429-4807  
Mobile: 956-571-6051  
E-mail: sue_griffin@sbcglobal.net

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**Valley Nature Center**

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

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We grow plants suited to landscaping and revegetation in south Texas.

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P.O. Box 442  
Rio Grande City, TX 78582

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(956) 486-2576 fax  
info@rancholeyamas.com  
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**Services:**  
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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 @ 956-682-0549, or g-el1951@sbcglobal.net
See The Sabal and our 5 handbooks on our website: www.nativeplantproject.org

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_____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)-682-0549; g-el1951@sbcglobal.net
Native Plant Project Meetings – February 24, 2009. **Board meeting** at 6:30 p.m.; **General meeting** at 7:30 p.m. **Nick Hoelscher**, past president of NPP, will present “My Favorite Native Landscape Plants”. For over 20 years, Nick has been selling native plants at the Valley Garden Center in McAllen and is considered their resident scholar of horticulture. He is an expert on growing the Valley's natives and will have lots of tips to share.

**Board and General Meetings 2009:**

2009: January 27   February 24   March 24   April 28   May 26
          September 22   October 27   November 24

**SUMMARY OF THE MINUTES OF THE BOARD MEETING – JAN. 27, 2009**

Upcoming events were announced, including the McAllen Home Show (at which the NPP will have a booth) on March 27th, 28th, and 29th; and The Invaders of Texas Workshop on April 18th at Estero Llano Grande State Park, Weslaco. The Board elected Eleanor Mosimann as President, Chris Hathcock as Vice-President, Susan Thompson as Secretary, and Bert Wessling as Treasurer.

Native Plant Project
P.O. Box 2742
San Juan, TX 78589

www.nativeplantproject.org