NPP meeting topic/speaker:

“Identifying Similarities Within Plant Families”
—by Angela Rojas

Tues., February 27th, at 7:30pm

Angela Rojas is the educational programs coordinator at Quinta Mazatlan. Who better to introduce us to plant identification, which can be an intimidating venture? Just as we may resemble people in our family, so do plants. Characteristics of leaves, stems, and flowers can tell us a lot about commonly seen plants in South Texas. Knowing these shared traits will help you see patterns that you’ll begin to notice wherever you go! This will be a fascinating program.

Please join us.

The meeting is at:

Valley Nature Center,
301 S Border, (in Gibson Park),
Weslaco. 956-969-2475.

Above: Pixie on Chomonque, Gochnatia hypoleuca, PDST 101. Asteraceae. Unusual 2-lipped flowers. New efforts to propagate this excellent winter butterfly nectar plant are underway. Photo by Mike A Rickard.

The Sabal is the newsletter of the Native Plant Project. It conveys information on native plants, habitats and environment of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas.

Previous Sabal issues are posted on our website [www.NativePlantProject.org]. Electronic versions of our Handbooks on recommended natives for landscaping are also posted there.

Change of address, missing issue, or membership: <bwessling@rgv.rr.com>
President - Ken King - <wk_king01@yahoo.com>
A Time For Sprouts and Seedlings, Cool, Misty Weather

Cool temperatures and damp weather are bringing forth many seedlings in the past few weeks.

Some areas have received little rain, but our hardy plants seem capable of absorbing enough moisture from fog, mist and dew to show new signs of growth. Indeed, the tiny hairs on many wildflower leaves which make clear focus so difficult may hold droplets of moisture, creating a nicely humid microenvironment for healthy growth.

Vines which disappeared during hot, dry weather are beginning to emerge from hardy roots.

Tree and shrub seedlings are also appearing. Some are confusing, especially Acacias with their bipinnate leaves.

On the Native Plants Facebook pages, members are posting photos of wildflowers and their seedlings, often hoping for help with identification.

Some of our wildflowers appear in many yards and urban landscapes, while others occupy very specific niches which are rarely observed. Wildflowers continue to sprout between the bricks of my backyard path, remnants of natives which have persisted despite years of farming which preceded our subdivision.

If you have a look about, you’ll likely observe this phenomenon, gaining insights to share.

Here are a few of the wildflowers appearing now around Harlingen and in Ramsey Nature Park.

Clockwise from Left:


Bladderpod, *Paysonia* sp., PDST 154. Fruit characteristics help to distinguish the species. Covers large expanses of vacant lots with mats of lovely yellow blooms.


Fiddleleaf Nama, *Nama jamaicense*, PDST 280. Annual. From a taproot. Appears earlier than other wildflowers, even in very cold weather.
Wherever we can control the growth of invasive exotic grasses along sunny trails and roadsides, wildflowers are likely to germinate. We may not be able to identify each of the tiny specimens which appear, but protecting them is important nevertheless.

Some species grow and bloom quickly, like the yellow Cowpen daisies below, *Verbesina enceloides*, PDST 134. Others, like the white-blooming Coastal Germander in the center photo, may already be producing mature seed, which may be collected and sown to introduce this species to new areas. *Teucrium cubense*, PDST 292. Doubtless many small animals consume these seeds.

Below right is Wild parsley, *Ammoselinum popei*, photographed by Al Richardson at Ramsey Nature Park on 1-30-2011. It is a host plant for the Black Swallowtail. Leaves are eaten by white-tailed deer. Wild parsley is not safe for humans to eat; it may accumulate such heavy metals as selenium. Several Umbelliferae appear mostly in spring: PDST 68-70.

If tiny herbaceous seedlings are in the vicinity, it’s wise to avoid spraying herbicide about. New seedlings are much more likely to suffer from herbicide exposure than mature, toughened exotic grasses or any woody specimens encroaching into trails.

Many of our herbaceous natives are disappearing as tall invasive grasses, mowing, widespread herbicide application, increased wildlife pressure on smaller and smaller habitats and human intervention continue. Plant rescue, seed collection, and appropriate management help.
Cold Season Plants.

Some species which show up in cool weather are naturalized, like many of us, from Europe. One such example is Sow Thistle, on the right. (*Sonchus sp.* PDST 126.) The seed may have been in animal feed or even mixed in crop seed brought over by hopeful farmers. Ken King points out that small birds eat the seeds. Critters may use the fluff to line their nests or cavities. Pigs, cows, sheep, goats, white-tailed deer and Rio Grande Turkeys consume the leaves. Humans may also. Delena Tull gives specific directions for use. “If you get them early enough,” Tull writes, “the young basal leaves...might be mild enough for use in a salad.” More likely, she points out, “you’ll want to boil them briefly in one to three changes of water to reduce the bitterness.” (“Edible and Useful Plants of Texas and the Southwest,” 1987.)

A delightful native has been showing up on Facebook this winter, providing nectar for various butterflies. The right-hand photo, by Ginny Rickard, is a Funereal Duskywing on Beaked Vervain, *Glandularia quadrangulata,* PDST 414. Blooming from spring to fall, it grows prostrate on trails at Ramsey Park and many other locations throughout deep South Texas.

One may not think of cacti as winter bloomers, but Fishhook (Root) Cactus, *Ancistracactus scheeri,* PDST 161, blooms in winter and spring. Dr. Al Richardson captured this shot in Starr county on 2/6/2010.

*Lantana achyranthifolia,* PDST 414, was lovely in Ramsey Park’s Runyon Garden in the cold and mist. Common names include Hammock and Brushland Lantana.

Horatio Martinez photographed this Pipevine Swallowtail nectaring on a “Texas Ambassador;” *Rio Grande Phlox, Phlox drummondii,* PDST 352. Native to the sandy soils of deep South Texas, seeds were collected in 1834 by Thomas Drummond near Gonzalez, TX, who took them back to England for garden planting.

According to Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, “About 200 true breeding strains were developed from this single collection of seed, including red, pink, white, lavender, maroon, coral, pale pink, and the mixtures of these colors, with the central “eye” of the flower differing in color from the outer color of the petals.” Leaves of Drummond’s Phlox are eaten by white-tailed deer and bobwhite quail. An annual, which grows from a taproot, it is most often seen blooming in spring, but may continue blooming longer.
Winter Pollen and Nectar.

While many species appear to be in a dormant state and blooms are not yet abundant in mid-February, others are providing nectar and pollen even in this misty, dreary cold.

Left: Photo by Mike A Rickard. Gray Hairstreak on Low Croton. Low Croton, *Croton humilis*, PDST 217, has appeared many times on the local RGV Butterflies Facebook page throughout the winter, with a wide range of nectar-feeding butterflies. It’s an all-season plant, though it shrinks and wilts through periods of drought. It is also a host plant for the Tropical Leafwing.

Below: Blue Mistflower, *Tamaulipa azureum*, PDST 127. (Inset: seed.) This Asteraceae begins to bloom in winter or spring. Leaves are right triangles, while the similar Crucita has elongated, smelly, triangular leaves. It is an excellent nectar plant and one of our most vigorous winter/spring herbaceous plants. Seed must be planted on the soil surface, in contact with sunlight, for germination. They are disseminated on the wind by tiny umbrella structures, each bearing a seed.

Right: Sweet Stem, *Aloysia gratissima*, PDST 411. Lovely purple blooms and soft, aromatic leaves make this a beautiful garden plant. It is a good nectar source, as well. Usually found on gravelly hills or caliche soils, it also occurs on sandy ranches of the western valley.

Below: Butterflies nectaring on Velvet Lantana, *Lantana velutina*, PDST 417. Soft leaves appear crinkled, with deep venation and notched margins. White blooms with yellow centers are followed by reddish berries eaten by birds and small mammals. Rather easily grown from seed. Very susceptible to frost damage, but blooming well during cold, moist spring weather. Left: Mary Beth Stowe’s photo, Texas Crescent. Center: Mike A Rickard’s photo, Lantana Scrub Hairstreak. Right: Mike A Rickard’s photo, Vesta Crescent.
Be Careful Where You Mow!! Pollen and nectar sources in the urban lawn.
Most of our wildflowers disappear under mowers, as yards and fields are mown on regular schedules regardless of whether anything is in bloom. Some species can survive mowing if the mower blades are raised. Even more helpful, of course, is to mow around anything in bloom. Here are some of the things which sprout in yards.

Left: Yellow blooms of Straggler Daisy, Calyptocarpus vialis, PDST 90, appear in all seasons of the year. It appears in many yards and disturbed places. If you can grow nothing else, you can probably grow this! Photo of nectaring Dainty Sulphur is by Mike A Rickard.

Below: Scarlet Sage, Salvia coccinea, PDST 288, will seed out in yards once it’s established. Blooms are especially beautiful in cold weather. Hummingbirds and butterflies nectar. Small birds consume the seeds. Gulf Fritillary photo by Mike A Rickard.

Right: Tube Tongue, Justicia sp. PDST 50-51. Blooming bravely despite being consistently mown. Host plant for Tiny and Elada Checkerspot, Texas and Vesta Crescent butterflies. Long blooming period.

Below: Western Pygmy Blue nectaring on Scorpion’s Tail, Heliotropium angiospermum, PDST 144. Photo by Dan & Honeylet Jones. This small wildflower provides excellent butterfly nectar utilized by many species. Inset shows crinkled, deep-veined leaves of the seedling.

Several species of purple-blooming Verbenaceae occur in deep south Texas. Some bloom in all seasons. Most appear in spring. Glandularia sp. PDST 413-4. Previous name: Verbena sp.

Left: Black Swallowtail photo by Mike A Rickard.

Right: Southern Dogface photo by Mary Beth Stowe.
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(4th Tues. each month, except thru summer)

Brd Mtns 6:30pm — Speaker 7:30pm
2018 meeting dates: 3/27, 4/24, 5/22

LRGV Native Plant Sources

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

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Large and small butterflies nectar at this shrubby trailside mallow, Malva Loca, Malvastrum americanum, PDST 312. This plant blooms in all seasons, despite cold or drought. Rabbits feed on the leaves. It is likely that birds consume the seeds. Mike Quinn lists this as a host plant for the Laviana White-Skipper.

Butterfly photos by Mike Rickard.
Left: Mexican Fritillary.
Right: Tropical Checkered Skipper.
The Native Plant Project (NPP) has no paid staff or facilities. NPP is supported entirely by memberships and contributions. Anyone interested in native plants is invited to join. Members receive 8 issues of The Sabal newsletter per year in which they are informed of all project activities and meetings.

Meetings are held at:
Valley Nature Center, 301 S. Border, Weslaco, TX.

**Native Plant Project Membership Application**

- Regular $20/yr.
- Contributing $45/yr
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We hope to see you there! Refreshments will be served.

**Above:** Some specimens of Fiddlewood, *Citharexylum berlandieri, PDST 412*, bear ample quantities of winter fruit. Fruit/sap-feeding butterflies suck juices from these fruits. Many birds and mammals eat them, including this editor. Blooms provide ample butterfly nectar. Data from Dade County, Florida indicate that Fiddlewood is host plant for a moth, *Epicorsia oedipodalis*.

**In this issue:**

Cold Weather Species, Germinating Wildflowers, Winter Urban Lawns & Native Diversity