

# The Sabal

March 2026  
Volume 42, number 3



## In this issue:

March program by Mylen Arias p1  
Miracle of Spring Blooms. Huisache and Huisachillo p2  
Hogplum. Elbowbush. p3  
Crucillo p4  
Oreja de Ratón p5  
Shrubs Quiz. From John Brush's Native Garden. p6 Quiz answers p7.  
Sponsors, Nurseries, Landscapers, NPP Meeting Schedule p7  
Plant Species List, Membership Application p8

Plant species page #s in the Sabal refer to:  
**"Plants of Deep South Texas"** by A.Richardson & K.King (PDST).

**Plants of Deep South Texas** has been reprinted (without revisions).

Ask your favorite bookstore or nature center to restock it!

It appears to be available at this time on Amazon.

It is also available as an ebook for Kindle.

## **Native Plant Project (NPP) Board of Directors**

President: Jann Miller  
VP: Josue Ayala  
Secretary: Lizz Romero  
Treasurer: Bert Wessling  
Drew Bennie  
Zachary Johnson  
Ken King  
Christina Mild  
Rachel Nagy  
Barbara Peet  
Joe Lee Rubio  
Kathy Sheldon  
Joshua Torres

## **NPP Advisory Board**

Mike Heep  
Benito Trevino

**Editor:** Christina Mild  
<mild.christina@gmail.com  
Submission of relevant articles and/or  
photos are welcomed.

## **Editorial Advisory Board:**

Ken King, Jann Miller,  
Alfred Richardson,

## **NPP meeting topic/speaker: Tues., March 24th, at 7 pm**

**"Growing Community and Restoring Landscapes: Lessons from the Thornforest"**  
*presented by — Mylen Arias*

Mylen Arias of American Forests serves as Senior Manager of Community Resilience. She leads environmental literacy initiatives focused on restoring the Rio Grande Valley's native thornforest ecosystem.

Her presentation will highlight the power of community-driven restoration in one of the most biodiverse — and most threatened — ecosystems in North America. Drawing from her work across the region, Arias will share how collective action, education, and stewardship are helping to rebuild native landscapes and strengthen ecological resilience in the Rio Grande Valley.

As part of this special program, attendees will also experience a screening of the short documentary "Thornforest: Restoring the Wildlands of South Texas," created in collaboration with American Forests and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. The film highlights the extraordinary biodiversity of the thornforest — home to hundreds of bird species, butterflies, native plants, and endangered wildlife — while also telling the story of the people and organizations working to protect what remains.

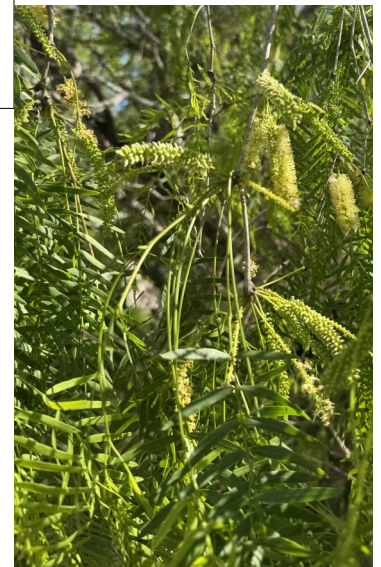
Following the screening, Arias will lead a brief question-and-answer session, offering attendees the opportunity to engage directly with the work being done to restore this iconic South Texas habitat.

With only a small fraction of the original thornforest remaining, efforts to restore and reconnect these landscapes are more critical than ever.

The program will take place at the Valley Nature Center, 301 South Border St. in Weslaco, behind Gibson Park.

The public is invited, and admission is free.

For more information about the Native Plant Project,  
visit <https://nativeplantproject.com>  
or follow us on Instagram @plantsofdeepsouthtx.



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

## A Miracle of Spring Blooms.

After little to no rain for several months, our spring-blooming trees and shrubs have popped out in blooms and gorgeous new foliage. These are phenomena which we should be documenting on iNaturalist. Mesquite has gorgeous new foliage and scattered blooms. Some Anacuas are covered in massive blooms. Huisache is very evident as you drive about, perhaps noticing specimens you weren't aware of. Blackbrush is sporting those creamy caterpillar-like blooms on dark branches. Has this moisture been stored in the root systems? Are the roots deep enough to reach the water table? Is moisture being absorbed from morning and evening dew? Probably all of these phenomena are occurring. It is still worthy of being called a miracle.

## Lesser-published Shrubs.

The Facebook group "Native Plants of the Rio Grande Valley" is a great resource. One sees what is blooming and fruiting, or perhaps leafing out. The questions submitted to that group are often insightful. I recommended a shrub species to a group member and NPP's Shrubs Handbook as a source of information on it. She pointed out that it isn't included in the Shrubs Handbook.

This brought to mind that a comprehensive list of locally-native shrubs isn't readily available. On one of Mike Heep's nursery plant lists, about 60 shrub species are listed. NPP's Handbook of Native Shrubs contains 28 species. Each of our shrubs is valuable to wildlife. In this Sabal issue, you'll find information about six of these.

**Huisache, *Vachellia farnesiana*** (photo right)

vs. **Huisachillo (Twisted Acacia) *V. schaffneri*** (photo below)

*These were previously classified as Acacia. They are now Vachellia.*

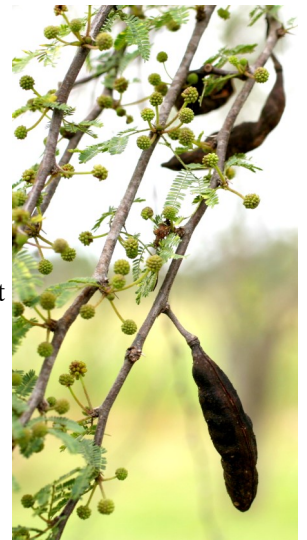
Each of these woody legumes is blooming now in deep south Texas. The blooms are identical. The aroma of each is worthy of a deep breath. While Huisache is often tall and loses limbs easily, Huisachillo is generally shorter.

Huisache occurs considerably north of deep south Texas, while Huisachillo is more restricted to the Rio Grande Plains.

Huisache blooms in spring. Huisache seedpods (photo on right) are shiny black, narrowing to a point on each end, resembling dried dog turds. One rarely finds Huisache seedpods remaining on blooming specimens. Al Richardson captured this photo of Huisache seedpods on a specimen ready to bloom. 2/22/2014, Estero Llano Grande.

Huisachillo seedpods are long, thin, velvety brown-black and sometimes "twisted." Huisachillo often bears immature and mature seedpods while in full bloom.

Huisachillo is abundant in Harlingen's Thicket. During summer and fall of 1999, it bloomed and put forth fruit at least three times. The pods of Huisachillo are sticky and sweet inside. This makes it a messy job to extract the seeds. Such a nutritious bundle is adored by javelina, birds and probably small mammals. The foliage is browsed by deer, sheep and goats.



**Vachellia farnesiana**

## Huisachillo, Twisted Acacia.

*Vachellia schaffneri*, (*Acacia schaffneri*) PDST 241.

Huisachillo is a diminutive form of the word Huisache, which comes from the ancient Nahuatl name huitz-axin.

This "twisted" acacia can be used as a landscape, ornamental or hedge plant in xeriscapes and rock gardens and does well in a variety of soil types. Branches often extend to the ground, making this shrub a thorny barrier to human intrusion. Height is rarely over 12', so it is unlikely that Huisachillo would interfere with power lines.

Because the seedpods remain on the shrub for many months, they can be a year-round source of food for wildlife. Blooming is not restricted to spring, so pollen and nectar is frequently available in rainy years, or when someone provides water.



**Vachellia schaffneri**

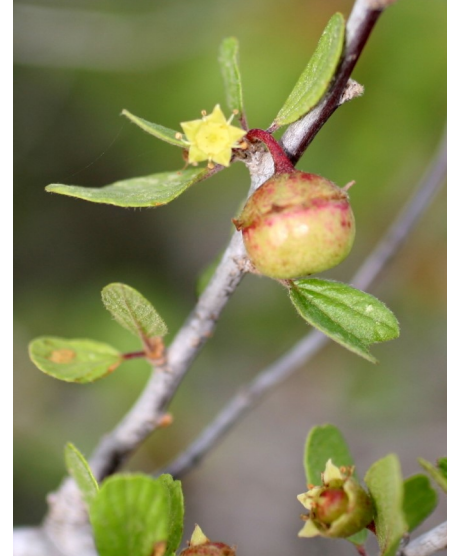


*Colubrina texensis*,  
**Hogplum**. PDST 364.  
Family Rhamnaceae.

3'-6' shrub. Venation is easily seen. Blooms spring-fall.

Thornless. Most commonly found in deep, sandy, drier sites. Aggressive invader on sites that have been mechanically manipulated.

Browsed by white-tailed deer. Fruit and seeds eaten by birds and small mammals, including javelina. Occasional nest site for birds. Cover for birds, small mammals and reptiles.



Notice the flattened blooms, with a wide nectar disk. Flies and other pollinators are attracted to the blooms, which act as a vital nectar source. Petals are small and inconspicuous. It offers limited browse for livestock. Seeds are reportedly toxic to sheep.

Fruits remain hard throughout ripening. They progressively redden, then develop a dry, cracked black covering. Hogplum seedlings available at NPP's February meeting were grown by Raziel Flores. He relates that scarification enhances germination, and recommends a hot water soak. Raziel found that seedlings grow moderately quickly in cultivation and transplant well. We should have more Hogplum seedlings available at the March meeting.

Widespread in south Texas: Fencerows, roadsides, disturbed sites, clay banks, shell ridges, loose sand, sandy loam, rocky limestone slopes and crevices, gravel hills, stream banks, alluvial terraces, gravelly flood plains, shrub-grasslands, mesquite shrublands, oak-mesquite, oak-juniper, and mesquite-hackberry woodlands.

*Forestiera angustifolia*. PDST 333.  
**Elbowbush, Panalero, Desert Olive.**

Elbowbush has many branches growing at the 90-degree angle one might hold an elbow. *Angustifolia* refers to the narrow, linear leaves. Desert Olive often bears fruit in very hot dry places. Fruits will only appear on female plants.

Usually found on dry, well-drained hillsides and arroyos in full sun. Mike Heep recommends this shrub for good root development.

When asked about the glut of fruit which I observed in April 2003, Heep commented, "The fruit won't be there for long. Coyotes will gorge on it. Birds will feast on it. And fruit which falls to the ground will be consumed or hauled away by other critters."

"Desert Olives" are inedibly bitter, but aren't poisonous. Licking one's finger after picking these fruits will likely result in much spitting and a search for water.

C. Mild photo. April 6, 2003. Harlingen Thicket. Female plant.



Aaron Guerra  
photo.  
UTRGV  
Campus.  
March 2026.



Taylor, Rutledge and Herrera give this detailed account of how wildlife utilize Desert Olive: "White-tailed deer and livestock browse the foliage and the fruit is eaten by many mammals, such as raccoons, foxes, ringtails, rabbits, ground squirrels, rats and mice, and by many birds, such as bobwhite and scaled quail, white-winged doves and numerous songbirds. The plant offers some canopy cover from predators and is an important source of food for bees." (A Field Guide to Common South Texas Shrubs. UT Press. 1994.)

Shrubs are often covered with masses of blooms after a decent rain, anytime from spring through fall. Male blooms will provide pollen; female blooms provide nectar.

This thornless shrub provides ample nesting spots for many birds. It can be made compact by trimming. This is a safe shrub to plant where children will play. Edinburg Scenic Wetlands WBC has trimmed their multitudes of Panalero into sculpted hedges.

**Crucillo.** (*translates to Little Cross.*) **(Indigo Fruit)**  
*Randia obcordata*, *R. rhagocarpa*. PDST 372.

In Texas, this shrub appears only in deep south Texas. Little has been written about it, beyond morphological description and range (which extends well into Mexico). The late Bill MacWhorter often emphasized the potential for landscaping.

Crucillo is a major component of the Arroyo Colorado plant community. It's a predominant shrub along existing trails in Harlingen's Thicket and environs. Excellent specimens occur in Ramsey Park. It is most easily identified by paired thorns, though these are not always present. Branches also grow in a pattern reminiscent of a cross. Leaves are quite small during drought. Following rains, they can be as large as an inch long. One can usually find several leaves shaped like a heart, attached at their point to a stem. (See photos below left.) Leaf shape, however, is variable. Leaves are clustered at each node. It is evident in the top right photo that leaves are eaten by insects.

Blooms on Crucillo grow directly from stem nodes. The branches are often covered in hundreds of blooms. You can't use them in a bouquet: most blooms fall off when the stem is cut. Crucillo will bloom multiple times in a year.

Mike Heep comments: "If I fertilize them a lot they will bloom more frequently. But they seem to flower when they want to."

Mike has also commented that animals may see Crucillo fruit as a food source of last resort, as many dried and shriveled fruits persist for many months.

In December of 2020, Ramsey volunteers were working on Medicinal Ridge, where several healthy specimens of Crucillo were heavy with black fruit. Humans approaching that area would encounter clouds of Mexican Bluewing butterflies. This butterfly sucks sap from fruits, rather than nectar from blooms. Rather than a tubular tongue, the Bluewing has structures on the tongue which can scrape up sap. If you observe this phenomenon, you'll notice that fruits are noticeably shrinking before your eyes. This is probably why so many persistent ripe black fruits on Crucillo appear to be shriveled.

Ripened fruits are reported to produce a blue dye, thus a possible common name is Indigo Fruit.

Crucillo has great landscaping potential. It is unlikely to grow taller than 8-10 feet, or to interfere with overhead wires. The thorns are not bothersome unless plastic bags are caught on them. Dr. Al Richardson has an excellent specimen in his front yard.



**Below:** left: paired spines and heart-shaped leaves.

center: The Band-Celled Sister butterfly uses Crucillo as a host. Photo by Berry Nall from [leps.thenalls.net]  
 right: Band-Celled Sister larva (*Adelpha fessonia*) photographed on Crucillo by Keith Wolfe.



**Oreja de ratón, Southwest *Bernardia*. (Mouse Ear.)**

One finds Mouse Eye listed as a common name for this shrub, though it is anybody's guess why that name is being passed around. The Spanish name for *Bernardia myricifolia* translates to Mouse Ear, which probably refers to the furry softness of the leaves. Refer to Josue Salazar's photo bottom left. These are mature leaves, showing the grey-green color and softness of older leaves. (We must admit that mice ears don't bear scalloped edges!)

In a popularity contest among deer, this plant might win hands down. Max Pons (formerly of Nature Conservancy's Southmost Preserve, Brownsville, TX) says that deer regard *Bernardia* leaves "in about the same way that a human thinks about ice cream." In spring, crude protein content of the leaves is 15-20%.

During the spring of 2004, the editor observed at least three crops of seed, of good quantity, on plants in Harlingen. "Seed-eating birds such as quail, doves, cardinals and sparrows readily eat the seeds." ("A Field Guide to Common South Texas Shrubs," Taylor, Rutledge and Herrera, 1994.) "It is a food plant for butterfly larvae and a source of nectar for adult butterflies."

The native plant website of TAMU lauds Oreja de Ratón as a landscape shrub for south Texas. It is thornless, relatively cold-hardy and well-adapted to heat and drought. Average height and width ranges between three and eight feet, a good size for many small landscapes.

Mike Heep recommends Mouse Ear for planting throughout the Lower Rio Grande Valley area. Unlike many plants which are finicky regarding drainage or a particular soil, this one is rather adaptable.

The range of Oreja de ratón extends from the Rio Grande Plains north to Central Texas and south to Tamaulipas, Nuevo Leon, and Coahuila, Mexico.

It isn't easy to find this shrub in the wild or in the native plant nursery, perhaps because the high-nitrogen leaves are rapidly consumed by browsers and ranchers are keen on planting it.

Harlingen's system of parks along the Arroyo Colorado holds a number of specimens of this attractive shrub. Because the native brush within those wild places is not subjected to grazing pressure, some desirable species occur there in greater numbers than in similar stands of brush elsewhere.

Below: Lacey's Scrub-Hairstreak (*Strymon alea*) uses this shrub as a host.

Butterfly photos are from [leps.thenalls.net].



**Oreja de ratón, Southwest *Bernardia*.  
*Bernardia myricifolia*. PDST 208.**

Leaves are more or less elliptic, dark green on the upper surface and grayish green on the lower, with rolled down, toothed margins.

Blades in full sun are generally less than 5/8 inch long, gray and densely hairy on the lower surface, and appearing to be twisted or distorted; blades in the shade up to 2 inches long, flat and light green on the lower surface.

Flowers inconspicuous, either male or female, on separate plants.

Fruit is a 3 lobed spherical capsule about 3/5 inch in diameter. It is best to harvest seed capsules as soon as there is evidence of a "split-line", as they will be eaten, or dehisce when temperature and humidity is right for them. It's best to cover harvested seed capsules with a wire screen, to capture dehiscent seed.

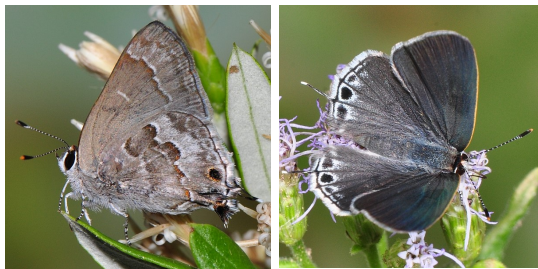
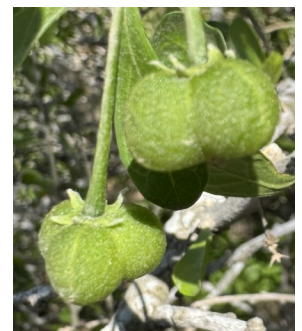
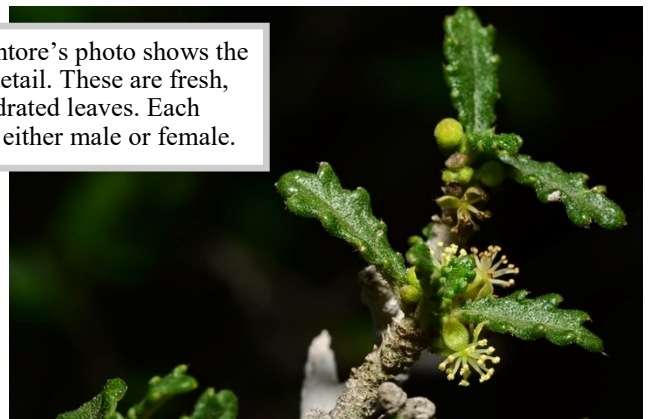


Photo right:  
Seed capsules of closely-related *Adelia vaseyi*.  
Note the light green "split-line" on these green seed capsules.  
This is where the capsule will dehisce when the seed is hard and ripe. When that happens the seeds will be here there and elsewhere.



Joey Santore's photo shows the bloom detail. These are fresh, well-hydrated leaves. Each shrub is either male or female.



# QUIZ

Select one or more of the shrub/tree species on pages 2-5 to complete the following:  
(answers are found on p 7)

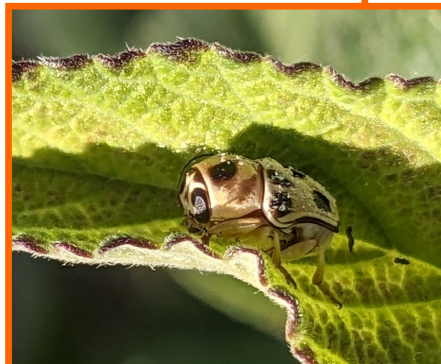
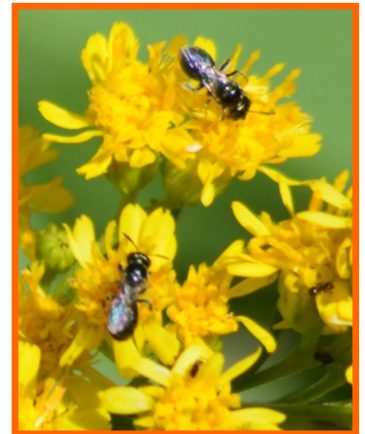
1	legume
2	black constricted pod which resembles a dog turd
3	host for Lacey's Scrub Hairstreak
4	long fuzzy black pod with lots of sugar inside
5	Euphorbia family: seedpod with 3 seed capsules
6	has either male or female flowers on separate plants
7	thornless, spineless and lacking prickles
8	spines and branches resemble a cross
9	host for Band-Celled Sister
10	not named for a mouse's eye
11	blooms fall off when you cut a branch
12	endemic to deep south Texas
13	fruit sap scraped out by Mexican Bluewing Butterfly
14	horrible-tasting fruits
15	common name refers to an animal
16	okay to plant under utility wires



**John Brush.** From a recent Facebook post, here are some photos and observations of his garden.

As the cactus start to bud out with new pads and flowers, I've been seeing some of the *Osmia mason* bees around. They go to the fresh, juicy growth around the spines and bite them off to help build their nests. (photo left).

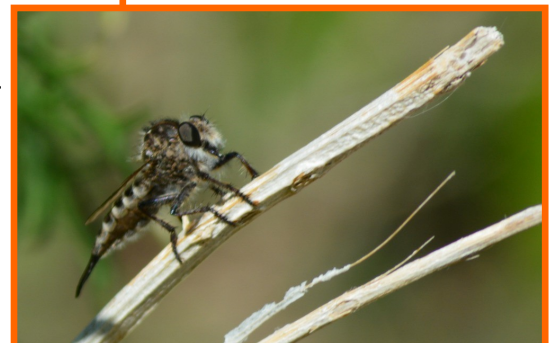
*Zadontomerus* bees. The little bees are a relative of the larger black carpenter bees that frequent Anacahuita, Mexican *Caesalpinia*, and Paloverde flowers. (photo right)



Left: Griburius beetle.

Right: Robber Fly.

*This might be a good time for a closer look in your native plant garden.*



*Sponsors (Native Plant Nurseries)*

**LRGV Native Plant Sources**

**Heep's LRGV Native Plant Nursery**

Owned and operated by Mike and Claire Heep

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

1714 S. Palm Court Drive, Harlingen, TX 78552  
(956) 457-6834 <heep0311@yahoo.com>  
Heep's Nursery is on Facebook



**Perez Ranch Nursery**  
(Betty Perez)

12 miles north of La Joya, TX  
(956) 587-2149  
<PerezRanchNatives@gmail.com>



**NPP Board & General Meetings**  
**are held at Valley Nature Center**  
(4th Tues. each month,  
except December & thru summer)

**Brd Mtgs 6 pm — Speaker 7 pm**  
**Upcoming meetings: 2026:**  
March 24, April 28, May 26.

Answers to the QUIZ on page 6:

- 1 Huisache, Huisachillo.
- 2 Huisache.
- 3 Oreja de ratón, Southwest Bernardia. *Bernardia myricifolia*.
- 4 Huisachillo, *Vachellia schaffneri*.
- 5 Oreja de ratón. *Adelia vaseyi*.
- 6 *Forestiera angustifolia* (Elbowbush). *Bernardia myricifolia* (Southwest Bernardia).
- 7 Species from pages 3 and 5: Hogplum. Elbowbush. Oreja de Ratón.
- 8 Crucillo, *Randia obcordata*.
- 9 same as above.
- 10 Oreja de ratón, Southwest Bernardia. *Bernardia myricifolia*.
- 11 Crucillo, *Randia obcordata*.
- 12 same as above.
- 13 same as above.
- 14 *Forestiera angustifolia* (Elbowbush).
- 15 Oreja de ratón, Southwest Bernardia. *Bernardia myricifolia*.  
and Hogplum, *Colubrina texensis*.
- 16 all but Huisache, which grows too tall and breaks easily.

Photo on left by Anita Westervelt.  
Anita captured this Hooded Oriole just before he drank nectar from her blooming Coralbean tree.  
*Erythrina herbacea*, PDST 261.



**La Floresta Native Nursery**

David Laughlin  
956-410-9034; 2506 Emerald  
Lake Dr.  
Harlingen, TX 78550  
Available by appointment.

**Nursery/Landscaper/Educator: RGV Natives!**  
**Prickly Pair RGV**

Owners: John & Stephanie Brush  
Native Plant Pickup or Delivery  
In-Person or Virtual Consult for Landscape Design  
Educational Programming  
Contact at: <prickly.pair.rgv@gmail.com>  
or use the contact form at [https://prickly-pair-rgv.com/]

**Nurseries/Landscaper selling Natives & Exotics:**

**Oleander Nursery** (Seth & Candi Welliver)

Follow their Facebook page for updates!  
2421 S Conway Ave, Mission, TX 78572  
Candi 956-569-2367.  
<Oleandernursery@gmail.com>  
Open 10am-5pm Sat.-Sun. By appointment on weekdays.

**National Butterfly Center**

Old Military Hwy/3333 Butterfly Pk Dr.  
Mission, TX 78572  
[http://www.nationalbutterflycenter.org]

**Rancho Lomitas Nursery** (Benito Trevino)

P.O. Box 442, Rio Grande City, TX 78582  
(956) 486-2576 \*By appt. only

Landscaping, Etc. Inc., **Noel Villarreal**

125 N. Tower Rd, Edinburg;  
956-874-4267, 956-316-2599

**FROM:** NPP; POB 2742; San Juan, TX 78589

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**

**NEW:** Student \$5/yr. (high school or college)  
Regular \$20/yr. Contributing \$45/yr  
Life \$250 one time fee/person  
“Awards” fund donation: \_\_\_\_\_

Please print:

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_

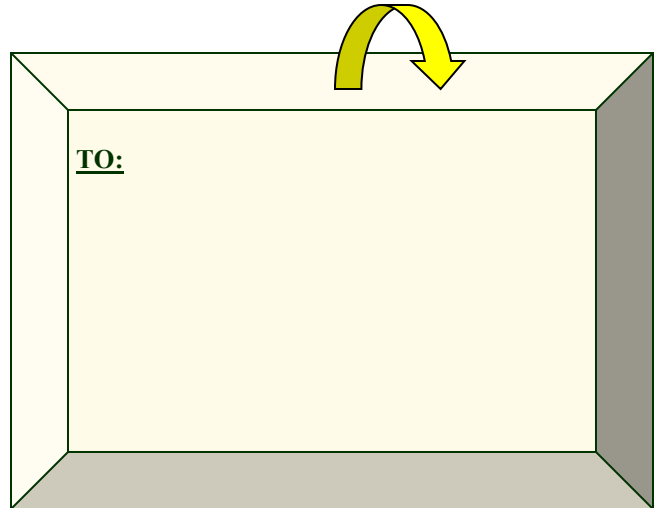
Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_

I'm choosing the “green option!” **Send my SABAL via .pdf file to:**

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

*Please mail this form with dues check payable to:*  
Native Plant Project, POB 2742, San Juan, TX 78589-7742

Are your dues current? Membership year is Jan.-Dec.



**NPP meeting/speaker:**

**Tues., March 24th, at 7 pm**

“Growing Community  
and Restoring Landscapes:  
Lessons from the Thornforest”

*presented by — Mylen Arias*

The meeting is held at **Valley Nature Center**,  
301 S Border, (in Gibson Park), Weslaco.  
956-969-2475

Feel free to bring a native plant for I.D.  
Native Plants are available for a donation.  
**(Please be generous!)**

We encourage donations of plant pots, seeds,  
and cuttings of native plants.



C. Mild photo. 3/13/2010. San Isidro, TX.  
*Colubrina texensis*, Hogplum in bloom.  
More about this native shrub on p 3.

**Plant Species Featured in this issue:** *Adelia vaseyi*, *Bernardia myricifolia*, *Colubrina texensis*,  
*Erythrina herbacea*, *Forestiera angustifolia*, *Randia obcordata*, *R. rhagocarpa*, *Vachellia farnesiana*, *V. schaffneri*.