



# The Sabal

October 2009

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## October Meeting of the Native Plant Project: **Tuesday, October 27th at 7:30 P.M.**

Valley Nature Center, 301 S. Border  
(in Gibson Park), Weslaco.

### **“Benefits of Using Native Plants for Landscaping in the LRGV”** *by Chris Hathcock.*

Chris is Vice-President of the NPP Board of Directors, on which he has served for 5 years. Come learn the many values of native plants and get ideas for using LRGV natives to enhance your home or business landscape.

For more information visit our web site at:  
[[www.nativeplantproject.org](http://www.nativeplantproject.org)]



Skipper butterfly nectaring on Tulipan del Monte, a locally-native species of the Mallow family.

**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](http://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](mailto:bwessling@rgv.rr.com)>

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**A Salute to Gene Lester,**  
**Long-time NPP Volunteer**

Gene Lester recently resigned as Editor to this publication after many years of exceptional service in that capacity. Below is an interview with Gene regarding his experience as an NPP volunteer.

**What do you remember most about the early days of the NPP?** For me it all seemed so intimidating. My earliest recollections were of a panel of older men (Jim Everett, Joe Ideker, Clayton Scribner, Bill MacWhorter, Jim Chapman, and others whose names I don't recall) sitting on an elevated platform overlooking the general audience. This native Plant Project (NPP) meeting, at that time, was in a bank in downtown Weslaco, TX. The group of men was the Board of Directors; they were having their business meeting. The business meeting extended beyond the starting time for the general meeting and nobody in the general audience protested. We all sat patiently waiting. I said to myself, "how rude, I'll stay five more minutes and if the general meeting does not start, I'll leave." The general meeting started within the five-minute time-frame I'd allotted, and the topic, well, I don't recall (after all that was 26 years ago). I knew I wanted to know more about plants native to this region, a region I had newly moved to after finishing

my education at the University of California. I attended two following meetings and was asked to join the Board by Joe Ideker, a surprise to me as I had barely become a member.

**What has surprised you most about the direction the NPP has taken?** The mission of the NPP has stayed close to its founding objective: being an educational source for native plants of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas (LRGV). The LRGV consists of four counties in South Texas (Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, and Willacy). My only reason for mentioning this political boundary is *to question why the same approximate area does not extend into Mexico?* After all, flora and fauna don't know about geo-political boundaries. But I digress. What has surprised me most are two things. Firstly, the Board is no longer exclusively an old men's club; it's nearly 50:50 men and women. Secondly, I am greatly disappointed it still is (even though attempts have been made) populated almost entirely by non-Hispanics. Why that is I do not know; I trust this, too, will change.

**What are some of your most cherished recollections about being part of the NPP?** Over the years, as I became more and more familiar with plants native to this region, I realized a need for a simple publication, not too academic, that featured mostly colored photos of the important identifying

and landscaping attributes of select native plants. As a result, a task lovingly given to me by the Board, I secured funding from the Texas Forestry Service, and took or borrowed colored slides. Joe Ideker handwrote the narrative, which I typed, and I worked with Gateway Printing, Edinburg, Texas to produce NPP's first handbook: *Native Trees of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas – Landscape Uses and Identification*. The popularity and financial success of this handbook led to NPP producing four additional handbooks: Shrubs; Cacti, Ground Cover and Vines; Pond and Wetland Plants; and Butterfly Gardening Plants. In the process of developing four out of five of these

handbooks I got to know three (Mike Heep, Sue Griffin, and Bill MacWhorter) very helpful and extremely patient – with my ignorance – mentors on South Texas' native plants.

Gene Lester, M.S., Ph.D.  
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*From the NPP board and membership, we wish Gene all the best in his future endeavors. We look forward to learning what new directions his life will take!*



Skipper nectaring on *Trixis inula*. South Texas' butterfly populations are largest in the fall, especially in October. Thus, fall blooming plants are especially important for their survival. *Trixis* produces excellent nectar.

### **NPP Minutes of September 29, 2009 meeting:**

Gene Lester recently retired from his job as editor of *The Sabal*. The Native Plant Project wishes to thank Gene for his many tireless years of dedication to the Native Plant Project, especially for his work on *The Sabal*. We also thank Mary Moad of Better Way Shipping in Weslaco for her past work in publishing the newsletter. We have delayed publication of our first autumn issue of *The Sabal* until October.

The September board of directors meeting, originally scheduled for September 22nd, was cancelled at the last minute because of flooding at the Valley Nature Center in Weslaco. Our speaker, Mike Quinn, has graciously agreed to return to the Valley to talk about insects at a later date. To all of you who showed up at the Valley Nature Center expecting to hear Mike speak, please accept our apologies for this inconvenience.

The directors meeting was rescheduled to September 29th. Two donations were given at the meeting. In gratitude to the Valley Nature Center for its generous support of the Native Plant Project through the years, especially for the use of its building for monthly NPP meetings, the directors donated \$1000 to the Valley Nature Center Capital Fund. The directors also donated ten sets of our native plant booklets that were used at workshops given in Ciudad Victoria by Texas Parks and Wildlife in conjunction with the Agencia Ambiental para el Desarrollo Sustentable del Estado de Tamaulipas (State of Tamaulipas environmental agency for sustainable development).

The Native Plant Project will be offering plants and brochures for sale at two local upcoming events: the Green Living Festival on Saturday, October 17, at the McAllen Convention Center from 10 a.m. - 6 p.m., and the Harlingen Birding Festival from Thursday, November 12, through Sunday the 15th. The trade show is located at the municipal auditorium complex at 1204 Fairpark Boulevard in Harlingen. A one-gallon plant will be given to each new member who signs up at either of these two events.



Propagation from cut stems works well. Cuttings should be left to dry, protected from the sun, until a callus is formed over the cut area. This may take a week or two. At such time, a shallow hole can be dug, the cutting inserted and watered. Partial shade is recommended. If the cutting is large, support may be provided by a stake, a tree or a fence. Cuttings may grow a foot or more in a year. Established plantings may grow six feet or more in one year and bloom prolifically with abundant water. This cactus is not as drought tolerant as

thick-stemmed species of desert areas.



Blooming occurs during late spring and summer, probably correlating with rainfall. Historically, blooming was celebrated by special gatherings, a night-time party, especially near Los Fresnos, where large colonies once grew. In an age before television and air conditioning, it is easy to see why summer parties would be held outdoors after dark.

**Barbwire Cactus** — by Ken King and C. Mild

Botanic name: *Acanthocereus tetragonus*

Synonym: *Acanthocereus pentagonus*

Synonym: *Cereus pentagonus*

Common Names: Barbwire cactus, Triangle cactus, Night-blooming Cereus, and others.

*Acantho-* means spiny. *Cereus* are typically arborescent, tall with columnar stems, with sprawling growth supported by trees. It is an artificial grouping in which cactus are lumped according to their growth form rather than floral structure.

In Mexico, plants are typically 5-ribbed, while mature specimens in deep south Texas typically have 3 ribs. In all likelihood, our specimens do not reach full maturity due to cold damage. During our worst winters, they freeze to the ground, then quickly regenerate from underground roots or stems.

The typical range in south Texas is primarily the coastal areas, especially around lomas, extending north into Willacy county. It is difficult to ascertain the exact western range, as the plant is widely cultivated. The distribution is primarily the Caribbean, from southern Texas thru central America and northern South America, the Antilles and southern Florida.

Seeds typically germinate beneath a nurse plant. The tender seedling would likely perish in full sun. Seedlings may grow several inches in the first year. They generally have more ribs than mature stems, which typically have 3. Depending on what happens to the plant, the number of ribs may vary.

Many animals use this cactus. It is possible that our only nectar-feeding bat, the Mexican long-tongued bat *Choeronycteris mexicana* (photo on adjoining page) uses cereus blooms as a food source. Many species of Sphinx Moths (family Sphingidae) gather nectar from night-blooming plants, including barbwire cactus. Each cross-pollinates as it feeds, unwittingly carrying pollen from plant to plant. Wood rats build their middens within the tangle of cereus stems and feed on the ribs, fruit and seeds. Texas tortoises also live within that tangle and eat the stems and fruit.

Woodpeckers peck open the fruit to consume it. Once opened, the pulp is available to other birds, insects and even some mammals, including coyotes. Everitt and Drawe (1993) report that Bobwhite quail, white-tail deer, javelina and raccoons eat the fruit.

Young stems are edible by humans, either raw or cooked. The triangular stem of cereus is more easily stripped of spines than the flat spiny, glochid-laden pads of prickly pear. ***Cereus might be our most easily-grown vegetable!***





Very young specimens of night-blooming cereus usually have 5 spine-covered ribs, thus their older species name was *pentagonus*, meaning five.

The ripe red fruit of night-blooming cereus is eaten by many birds.

Many creatures eat the stems of *Cereus* cacti, especially the Texas Tortoise.

Stems and fruit are also edible by humans.



Chironectaris, face covered in pollen. This is South Texas' nectar-feeding bat; what an interesting pollinator!



With no gloccids (the tiniest spines on prickly pear) and spines arranged along the outermost part of each rib, night-blooming cereus stems are relatively easy to clean. The waxy epidermis (covering) should be removed before serving. (It's a bit like chewing on waxy cellophane.) Slices can be air-dried before serving. The flavor is good, a bit tart. Young stems are best. Older stems are very fibrous.



**Pink Pappusgrass** (*Pappophorum bicolor*)

is more common in western Hidalgo County into Starr County and in the sandy soils of northern Hidalgo and Willacy Counties. (photo below)



**Pretty Pappus Grasses—by Mike Heep**

There are two species of pappusgrass native to the Rio Grande Valley. Both may be used in landscapes where an attractive bunchgrass is desired.

Pink pappusgrass is the more showy. The "pink" in the name is not apparent from a distance, however. If you look closely at the inflorescence, you will see the pink in the pappusses (See photo above right).

Both pappusgrasses like sun. Whiplash pappusgrass can stand to be shaded a little. But the pink one really likes sun.

They are also quite drought tolerant. Once established they will survive no matter how little it rains. If they are given a little water from time to time they will produce flowers almost year round.

Whenever the subject of pink pappusgrass comes up, usually someone will ask about the pink grass they saw along a highway here in south Texas or down in northern Mexico. That pink grass is Natal Grass, introduced from South Africa.

*More articles about our native grasses are in the works and will be published in future issues.*

**Whiplash pappusgrass** (*Pappophorum vaginatum*) is found in the Arroyo Colorado brush and, more commonly, on the very loose Port Isabel Clay Loam soils on the lomas. It is the larger of the two. Each bunch grows 2 to 3 feet tall. The inflorescence (below) is a white to light brown tight spike-like panicle up to about a foot long. Sometimes one sees a purple tinge in the pappus bristles.



Details on inflorescence structure of pappusgrass:

The "pappus" in pappusgrass refers to the 11-15 hair-like (bristle-like) structures arising from the tip of the lemma. A lemma is one of the 2 little leaf-like structures that enclose the stamens and pistil in a grass flower. The other one is the palea. Don't knock yourself out looking for petals in a grass flower (floret). There ain't none.

These bristles at the end of the lemma that form the pappus are unique to the pappusgrasses. If you examine other grasses that have bristles (Buffelgrass, Bristlegrasses, etc.)

you will see that they almost always arise from down below the little florets, not from up on top. The genus *Pappophorum* and 2 other genera form the small Tribe Pappophoreae.

There are 21 tribes in the large grass family.

**Special note of thanks to:** *South Texas Natives* (Forrest Smith, Coordinator and Keith Pawelek, Mgr. of Production & Commercialization), *Rio Farms, Caesar Kleberg W.R.I., USDA Kika de la Garza Plant Materials Center* (John Lloyd-Reilley, Mgr).

*The diligence of these individuals and organizations has made the photos for this article possible. Their work has also made it possible to obtain seed to grow LRGV native grasses on a commercial scale.*

For more information on these grasses and other South Texas natives see: <http://ckwri.tamuk.edu/research-programs/south-texas-natives/native-plant-list/>





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NPP Board & General Meetings, 2009:

Sept 22    Oct 27    Nov 24

(Tuesdays) Board Meetings at 6:30pm. Speaker at 7:30pm  
Most meetings held at Valley Nature Ctr.

Experimental grass plots at Rio Farms. Test-plots managed by South Texas Natives, Caesar Kleberg W. R. I. USDA Kika de la Garza Plant Materials Center. Keith Pawelek, Mgr. of Prod. & Commercialization.



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 NPP activities and meetings.

**Meetings are held at:**

Valley Nature Center, 301 S. Border, Weslaco, TX.

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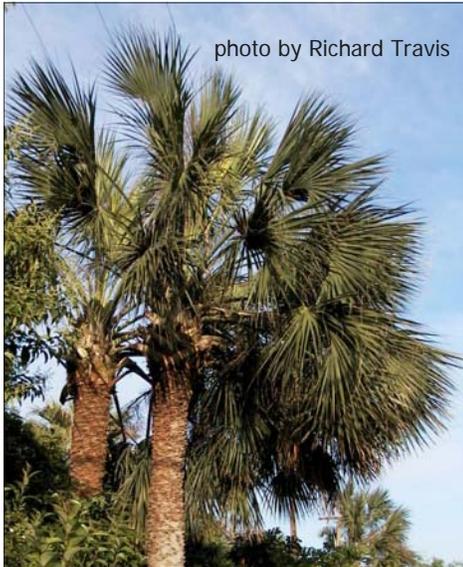


photo by Richard Travis

**Oct. 27th at 7:30 p.m.**

Valley Nature Center, 301 S Border, Weslaco, TX

**“Benefits of Using Native Plants  
for Landscaping in the LRGV”**

**by Chris Hathcock.**



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