October 2013 Mtg., Native Plant Project:  
**Tues., Oct. 22nd, 2013: at 7:30pm**

"Going Green, Growing Green" by Kate McSwain

Moving to the Valley 4 years ago, Kate McSwain bundled gardening, networking, community activism and environmentalism together. Her “Green Retro” project, utilizes what is existing while incorporating native plants and cost-effective “green fixes.” It starts at her home, reaching out as a ripple effect to her neighborhood, community, city and valley.

For over 40 years, Kate has been eating and gardening organically. Her background in theater as an actor, playwright, and director along with 25 years as a Montessori teacher and head of school, informs her life as an environmentalist and political activist.

Valley Nature Center, 301 S. Border,  
(in Gibson Park), Weslaco. 956-969-2475
The Sheer Beauty of Native Plants in Pots—Intro by Christina Mild

In The Sabal, Vol. 25, no. 4, April, 2008, Sue Griffin presented a well-researched and detailed article on growing native plants in containers. Following the publication of that article, Sue gave a PowerPoint presentation on the same topic in May of 2009. Sue’s article can be found on the Native Plant Project website. It will be very helpful to anyone considering the addition of potted native plants to the landscape. Some of Sue’s ideas are included here.

Native Plant Growers have been establishing specimens in pots for many years, for landscaping, revegetation, and other purposes.

Individuals who are active in the Native Plant Project have also been growing native specimens in pots for many years, and for many reasons.

Volunteers have often dug native specimens which were in jeopardy, keeping them in pots to recover from transplantation shock and/or until suitable places were selected or prepared for relocation.

Ken King and Dr. Alfred Richardson, in preparation for publication of Plants of Deep South Texas, had a very practical reason for tending to plants in pots. Identification, and a good photo for publication, often depend upon finding the plant in bloom. Quite often the natural habitat of the plant was hours away by car and a difficult hike thru nasty brush or muck. Making that trip on a frequent basis, in hopes of finding a bloom, was fairly impractical when you realize that “the book” covers more than 4 counties and about 900 plants!

After I transplanted candelilla from the shade of oak trees at our yard on the Arroyo to the full sun of my new home’s brick-surround mailbox, I was enthralled to witness the tiny, elaborate blooms. Having a solid surface (the brick planter) to brace the candelilla stems for photography produced the result above right. The bulging green protrusion from each bloom center is a 2-seeded capsule with three compartments (go figure?!). My eyes aren’t keen enough to have seen these wonderful details without the aid of a macro-lens digital camera.

Diann Ballesteros has been rescuing native cacti for many years and growing many of them in pots in her yard. She can wrap them or “garage” them when a cold spell or rainstorm is imminent. And, unlike Ramsey Park, where Diann has transplanted many rescued cacti, Diann’s yard harbors no feral hogs, javelina or armadillos to uproot them! There may even be fewer human poachers to contend with!

Recently I brought potted “butterfly nectar” plants to my new full-sun backyard, hoping to increase the butterfly diversity which visits there. It seems to be working! For that purpose, Mike Heep recommended Gregg’s Mistflower, Milkweed, Velvet Lantana and Mexican Trixis. Now they’re potted and beginning to bloom.

I’ve begun to realize, (as many have been trying to impress upon me) that growing native species in pots is a useful and fun experiment.
Some Surprises of Growing Natives in Pots

Species of Manfreda are some of the most threatened natives in this area. They are thornless, non-toxic (as far as I can gather), have a very long, fleshy taproot and an edible bloomstalk.

In Ramsey Park, where we have planted many Manfredas, the plants are almost always uprooted and eaten, especially during dry seasons.

Where the western-growing species grow, in caliche, uprooting is probably less of a problem. Most animals (rabbits among them) are more likely to eat the vegetative and reproductive structures above the rocky stratum in which they grow. However, humans on bulldozers are destroying native species of the caliche uplands at an even more alarming rate than feral hogs.

*Manfreda variegata*, once prolific in certain regions of Arroyo Colorado brush, has been rapidly disappearing. The soils in that biome are clay or sand, offering easy excavation, especially for armadillos, feral hogs and javelina.

The deep, fleshy taproot of Manfreda gave me the idea that these plants would do poorly in a pot, because of the relatively shallow depth of the usual pot. The photos above (all are potted specimens) clearly demonstrate that idea as false. Not only do the plants do well, they produce magnificent bloomstalks which tower above the plant, in some species, 6 ft. or more!

Growing Manfreda in the soil is great where possible. But even in my residential yard on the Arroyo, protection of the plants requires great vigilance and more cunning than I can muster. Armadillos are continually rooting up the plants, especially after I give the area a good watering! I’ve used clusters of big rocks around the Manfreda, which is slightly helpful. But all sorts of other plants, especially some decorative grasses (which have become invasive) are constantly encroaching on the spaces I’ve “reserved” for Manfreda.

So there are many reasons for growing Manfreda species in pots, for their beauty, and as a way of preserving the species. Native growers are happy to receive the seed, and seed collection is more legal in one’s yard than from the brush!

Photo above by Frank Wiseman. (*Manfreda variegata*)

Photo left by Diann Ballesteros. (2 species of native Manfreda)

Both photos show potted specimens of Manfreda native to the valley and infrequently encountered in the wild.

See PDST pgs 18-19.
Preserving Native Cacti

Large species of cacti, such as a Prickly Pear and Night-Blooming Cereus, provide valuable food and shelter for many animal species. These well-armed plants can hold their own pretty well.

The smaller native cacti species, which are easily uprooted by a number of animals and completely destroyed by bulldozer activity, should be on our “hotlist” of plants to protect. (Presumably, animals uproot small cacti to devour the moist interior.)

While several of our native cactus species are routinely propagated and sold by native plant nurserymen, it would be wonderful if more native cacti were offered for sale by ethical growers. (Theft of small cacti from nature parks is historically widespread; cacti for sale at flea markets is suspect for that reason. The late Bill McWhorter recalled the purse contents of a woman leaving Valley Nature Center: it was full of cacti just uprooted from the cactus garden. I don’t recall how she was persuaded to open the purse, but it had to be a great story!)

A number of “cactus gardens” has been planted around the valley. Those I’m most familiar with are those at Valley Nature Center and at Ramsey Nature Park in Harlingen.

Because many of the smaller cacti have evolved in the slight shade of dry-land shrubs, these species are “prettiest” when grown in partial shade. In a nature park setting, this translates to constant leaf and seedpod litter amongst the cacti, as well as an influx of colony-forming herbs and grasses after rain. Maintaining cactus gardens in these conditions requires painstaking care. (Ken King recommends long-nosed pliers.)

At one time, cactus gardens at Valley Nature Center were maintained by the Cactus and Succulent Society; most of their members are deceased and the society has ceased to function.

Thus, cacti which gained the attention of early botanists to the area and early German taxonomists, and which were kept in window pots in Dicken’s time in England, are almost unknown to today’s residents of Deep South Texas. (See PDST pgs 160-173.)

Diann Ballesteros has had great success with growing many cacti in pots. Most of us have adequate space to grow these small containerized plants.

Once cacti produce fruit, birds and other critters do a great job of spreading the seed around, often to places unfrequented by humans.

Photos by Diann Ballesteros, Harlingen, TX.
Moving Just One Plant:
The Continued Adventures of C. Mild

One of my favorite 897 plants is Isocarpha (oppositifolia), Rio Grande Pearlhead. My first encounter with this herbaceous perennial was in Harlingen Thicket about a dozen years ago. It would appear along trail edges when moisture was available. In dry seasons, it was all but invisible. Mike Heep identified it for me.

Rescued specimens planted beneath oak trees in our old front yard have reproduced well in recent years, most often appearing just on the edge where mowing will occur, or protruding over the concrete curb.

One specimen seemed in eminent danger of the mower, so I transferred it to a pot. With some water and attention, I thought it would add diversity and beauty to my barren (i.e. turf-grass-covered) new backyard. The small plant grew quickly in decent soil with a minimum of care.

Much to my surprise, Scarlet Sage and Texas Stonecrop came along for the ride. I shouldn’t be surprised that soil from my old front yard contains seed of many plant species. That spot has been used as a holding area for “salvaged” species for many years. Far from the boring predictability of neighboring manicured yards, one never knows what will be blooming in my unusual wildscape. It isn’t universally appreciated.

The Isocarpha which I potted looks wonderful and the Scarlet Sage blooms provide great color contrast. Seeds from the Scarlet Sage have dropped onto adjacent barren ground to the left of the pot and sprouted into seedlings. On the right side, Texas Stonecrop has lengthened into succulent stems which will shed teardrop-shaped leaves which may also sprout into new plants. Stonecrop is a favorite of rabbits; so far, none have burrowed under my fence! It is hostplant for the Xami Hairstreak butterfly, which has so far eluded me.

I’m horrible at following directions, but I seem to have stumbled onto some of Sue Griffin’s directives about growing natives in pots, i.e., growing several species together which have different colors, growth forms, and blooming seasons.

(See PDST pgs 109, 201, 288) Photos by Christina Mild.
Native Vines for Growing in Pots

Several native vines have been grown successfully in pots, these are typically delicate species which aren’t heavy enough to pull down the fence or overwhelm a trellis.

BELOW: Corky-Stemmed Passionflower Vine, PDST p 347.

One of the most frequently-grown native vines is the hardy but delicate Corky-Stemmed Passionflower Vine, Passiflora suberosa. It is, of course, vital to leave the dead-looking corky stem in place. It’s very easy to mistake it for a dead branch. A vigorous specimen will produce enough leaves to cover the main stems, making them less noticeable.

The blooms of this pretty vine are very small, about 1/4”, but they are delicately beautiful, with elaborate detail. Fritillary butterflies (photo below) will arrive very soon to lay eggs on your passion flower vine. The caterpillars (photo lower left) are easily disguised by their similarity with the twining stems.

An even more delicate vine is Maurandya, (PDST p 387) Snapdragon Vine. It is easily-grown from seed and readily available from native plant growers. I first encountered the vine along the Rio Grande in Hidalgo county. It is a hostplant for the Common Buckeye butterfly. The caterpillar below was photographed in 2005 and as far as I know has not yet been identified.

Remember to check out Sue Griffin’s article on the NPP website (maintained by Bert Wessling): The Sabal, Vol. 25, no. 4, April, 2008 at:
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Apr. 22nd, 2014
May 27th, 2014

NPP Oct. meeting/speaker on:
Oct. 22nd, 2013 at 7:30pm – "Going Green, Growing Green" by Kate McSwain

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Weslaco. 956-969-2475

Photos above: On left, Mammillaria heyderi, Pincushion, PDST p 168. On right, Mammillaria prolifera, PDST p 169. These are a few of the LRGV native cacti grown and photographed in containers by Diann Ballesteros of Harlingen. “I can wrap them or move them to my garage in severe cold weather,” Diann relates. “Some of them won’t survive heavy rain in our clay soils; they do much better in a well-drained pot.”

The Sheer Beauty of Native Plants in Pots!
In this issue, we examine a few of the reasons why individuals have chosen to grow natives in pots, some recommendations for the best candidates, and a few surprising findings.

This month’s SABAL topic: “The Sheer Beauty of Native Plants in Pots!”