



# The Sabal

## **Lotebush or Clepe** (*Ziziphus obtusifolia*)

by *Benito Trevino Jr.*

When I was young, many, many years ago, I recall walking through the thorny brush country here in Starr County and seeing a thorny bush that seemed strange to me. The new branches were pale green in color and heavily armed with thorns but the trunk and older branches were usually thornless and dark brown or blackish in color. At different times of the year, it would be full of bluish/blackish berries. My brothers and I would eat the berries when available as there was usually not much else to eat. Just like all fruits,

some were sweet and some were not, but we could not afford to be picky so we consumed what we could find. I recall asking my father one day what that plant was called. He told me it was called “clepené.” I have never seen the Spanish common name written as clepené, and when I have seen it written, it is usually spelled “clepe.” Of course most books also say that the fruit is not palatable and is only eaten by some birds and small mammals. I have seen many birds, as well as deer and coyotes, and humans eat the berries.

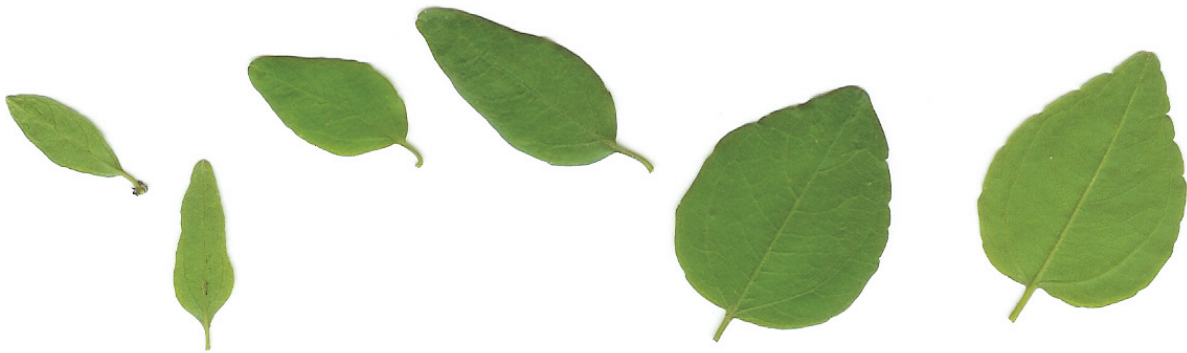
Lotebush, as it is known in English, grows in parts of Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California and Mexico. There are at

least 13 species in the genus *Ziziphus*. The species name, *obtusifolia*, comes from the shape of the leaf. “Obtuse” means blunt and refers to the tip of the leaf. “Folia” means leaf. When you put both words together, it means blunt pointed leaf. In the summer and in times of drought, lotebush will be leafless, a very impressive bush full of branches covered with sharp thorns. When it has leaves, the leaves will look more like the ones on the left. When conditions are

moist, the leaves will look more like the ones on the right.

A tea made from the roots of lotebush is used as a wash, to relieve eye soreness and also to treat sores. The ground-up roots are also used to treat sores and skin disorders.

Benito Trevino Jr. is a botanist and Board member of the Native Plant Project. Benito and his wife Toni live on and run La Lomitas Ranch in Rio Grande City, Texas.



Variation in the size and shape of Lotebush leaves.



Lotebush fruit picked, and attached to the plant.

Photos provided by Benito Trevino Jr.

## **A Closer Look at the LRGV's Diverse Wealth of Native Shrubs (Perennials for the Butterfly Garden)**

by Christina Mild

During a local habitat committee meeting, an attempt was made to establish clear guidelines regarding which plant species would be "acceptable" in the revegetation project at hand. Such guidelines are difficult to establish, yet they're essential to avoid repeated argument. One suggestion was to allow "only plants included in the NPP's series of booklets."

This suggestion points out that NPP's publications and website set the standard for using native plants in LRGV landscapes. An excellent compilation of data for each plant guides the decision-making process about where to plant and what to expect. Many trust and rely upon the expertise of the NPP, an awesome distinction for a bunch of volunteers.

But how comprehensive are the NPP publications? Do they contain "all" the landscape-worthy native species in a certain category? Do they include all the plants one should consider in projects aimed at habitat restoration? Actually, they were never intended to meet either of those criteria. Why might we have that misconception?

Consider the plants covered in the first booklet, *Trees*. Virtually every tall, single-trunk woody species native to the area is included in this NPP title. About 28 species fit into an NPP booklet,

and that's about the scope of our native tree diversity.

What about "Shrubs?" Is it possible to include all the landscape-worthy LRGV native shrubs to a list of 28 species? No, of course not. The definition of a shrub is rather inclusive. We typically think of a shrub as "shorter" than a tree, having woody branches, and multi-trunked. We can argue until the cows come home over which plants are shrubs.

Let's consider the wide diversity of plants included in NPP's *Shrubs*.

There's Trecul's Yucca, which fits this part of the definition of a shrub: "woody, (sometimes) multi-trunked."

Now consider *Trixis inula* or Chilipiquin, frequently classified as herbaceous. Start trimming large, well-watered specimens and you'll find that woody, (sometimes) multi-trunk.

How about Nopal, the Prickly Pear? Is this a shrub? Well, it does become woody and multi-trunked. If you don't think so, volunteer to remove an old specimen!

Coral Bean. Isn't that a tree? It is often multi-trunked. It's rather short for a tree, yet tall for a shrub. The same could be said for Mexican *Caesalpinia*.

Thus, the definition of shrub can be so wide as to include multi-trunk trees, agaves, large cacti and relatively-short things which at first glance appear to be herbaceous.

Everitt and Drawe's **Trees, Shrubs & Cacti** avoided the need to discriminate between trees and shrubs by including both. This compilation includes many plants one might consider herbaceous: Carlowrightia, Tetramerium, several agaves, Flor de San Juan, Crowded Heliotrope (which I'd call a groundcover), Orange Zexmenia, *Zinnia acerosa*, and a bromeliad (*Hechtia*). One realizes that the scope of plant material classified as "Shrub" can be quite diverse. Those of shortest stature are often called "subshrubs."

Doesn't **Common South Texas Shrubs** (Taylor, Rutledge & Herrera) answer the need for comprehensive information and a comprehensive list of native shrubs? No. A great number of the 40 species included there are arguably trees. Several included species don't tolerate LRGV growth conditions. That leaves perhaps 20 shrubs appropriate for LRGV wildscaping, a smaller selection than the NPP **Shrubs** title contains.

How important are the shrubs and sub-shrubs anyway? Well, most yards and public spaces usually have room for them, even with a full complement of mature trees.

As interest in butterfly gardens has grown, I've begun to write increasingly about plants which attract butterflies, by nectar or larval food, selecting them from Mike Quinn's "Caterpillar Food Plants for the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas." I've concentrated to some degree on those already propagated by native plant growers. Comparison of the species included on Quinn's list, NPP's publications and **Rio Delta Wild** subjects produced a list of less-publicized shrubs and subshrubs, worthy of use in landscaping and especially useful in creating open, sunny, butterfly gardens. The horticulture industry might lump this assortment of plants into "perennials," emphasizing their longevity.

Increasing numbers of people are planning and planting "Butterfly Gardens." Most are looking for short-stature perennials which will attract butterflies for easy viewing.

I've concocted a list of 48 less-publicized "Perennials" which help to fill that niche. My list is far from complete. A cursory look through Everitt & Drawe's *Trees, Shrubs & Cacti of South Texas* brings several additional species to mind. I have yet to write about such gorgeous plants as Gregg's *Mortonia*, Cortes' *Croton*, *Buddleja sessiliflora*, *Condalia spathulata*, *Zinnia acerosa*, *Wedelia hispida* or *Atriplex canescens*.

The wealth and diversity of little-advertised native perennials is under-exploited treasure. Several talented people have photographed the butterflies which rely upon these less-publicized

plants. My list may be useful to some readers. But how useful is such a list to a beginner? How can a list illustrate the beauty of these plants or the butterflies which use them? Is there a market

for a color photo-illustrated guide to “*LRGV Native Perennials for Butterfly Gardens*”?

Christina Mild holds a Masters degree in Biological Sciences. She may be contacted at RioDeltaWild@aol.com. Photo courtesy of C. Mild.



*Sclerocarpus* & nectaring skippers

November, with its cooler temperatures, is the beginning of the fall-winter- spring planting season in the Rio Grande Valley, Texas. Now is the best time to plant and transplant most native plants. Not only will you improve the value of your property, you'll improve its "habitat value". Native plants attract and provide food and cover for all of our wonderful and diverse critters. The exotics don't.

**Exclusively Native plant sources:**

Benito Trevino, Landscaper/Grower, Rio Grande City 487-4626

Native Plants -- Valley Nature Center, Weslaco 969-2475

Richard Holverson, Plants and Consulting, La Feria 797-2102

Mike Heep plants -- Wild Bird Center, Harlingen 428-2211

Mother Nature's Creations, Harlingen 428-4897

Frank Gonzales, Landscaper/Grower, Harlingen 412-2125



**Nature Happenings in the Lower Rio Grande Valley Texas**

**Texas State Park Tours/ World Birding Center, Mission, Texas**— Lomitas Ranch Tours and other natural area tours 7:30 a.m. – 5 p.m. every Tuesday and Friday from Benson Rio Grande State Park/World Birding Center in Mission, TX. Outings focus on native plants and their uses. Fees: \$25 per person: reservations required - call 956-519-6448. Or contact [www.worldbirdingcenter.org](http://www.worldbirdingcenter.org)

**Sabal Palm Grove Sanctuary**— Native plant presentation and tour by Joseph Krause – every weekday at 10 a.m. Pre-registration required – call 956-541-8034.

**Laguna Atascosa NWR**— Nature BIKE RIDES on Saturdays from 8 a.m. - 10:30 a.m. and Nature WALKS, Sundays from 8 a.m. - 10 a.m. Call for details: 956-748-3607.

**Santa Ana NWR**— Tram Tours will resume November 29<sup>th</sup>. Fees: \$3 for adults and \$1 for 12 years-old and under. Guided Nature WALKS are available. Call for details: 956-787-3079.

**The Sabal is the Newsletter of the Native Plant Project and conveys information on the native habitats, 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 @ 956-425-4005, or g\_lester48@msn.com. See a Sabal and our 3 handbooks on the website. www.nativeplantproject.org

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**Native Plant Project Annual Membership Application Form**

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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Comments/ suggestions/ speaker recommendations should be sent to: Native Plant Project, P.O. Box 2742, San Juan, TX 78589 or contact Gene Lester @ 956-425-4005 or g\_lester48@msn.com

Native Plant Project Meetings – November 23, 2004; **Board meeting** at 6:30 pm; **General meeting** at 7:30pm featuring: **Sue Griffin**, owner of Mother Nature's Creations, will present "Hugh Ramsey Nature Park in Harlingen, Texas: From Trash to Treasure".

**Board only meeting dates 2004**– December 28 (canceled).

**Native Plant Rescue:** The Valley Nature Center will rescue native plants about to be dug-up by construction companies and developers. Call 956-969-2475.

**HIGHLIGHTS OF THE NPP BOARD MEETING ON OCTOBER 26:** Diann Ballesteros, Gene Lester, Kathy Sheldon, Stan Strba, and Frank Wiseman will represent the NPP at the KMBH-TV membership drive on Oct. 27. The board approved a discount coupon to be given to children participating in Kiskadee Corner at the Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival. The coupon will give the child \$1 off the purchase of a plant or handbook at the NPP booth.

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

