



The Sabal

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Milkweed in the LRGV wildscape and “Milkweed, Monarchs & More”

by Christina Mild

This article attempts to combine (1) a brief review of an excellent book and (2) an overall view of LRGV-native milkweed species.

Milkweed, Monarchs & More

“A Field Guide to the Invertebrate Community in the Milkweed Patch,” by Ba Rea, Karen Oberhauser, Michael A. Quinn, 2003, Bas Relief Publishing Group, <http://www.basrelief.org>.

I’m dubbing this small volume **M³**. At \$9.00 including shipping and tax, this is one of the most enlightening volumes I’ve encountered. Precisely illustrated, this information-packed book is small enough to carry, about 4.5 x 6 inches.

That said, if you need bifocals, you’d best buy them before reading the small book.

By precisely illustrated, I mean to convey that each illustration, even half a bug, shows a salient feature of said creature.

As plant lovers/growers/students, we often wonder about the potential impact insects might have when we spot them on our beloved plants. **M³** details where the insect lays its eggs, what the larvae eat and why a particular insect might be lurking about.

M³ is an excellent compendium of use to those with no background in biology or ecology. It is also superb for anyone with advanced studies in biology and a desire for more precise understanding of insect-plant interaction.

I can’t think of a publication I’d rather use in teaching children or adults the nitty-gritty of a terrestrial plant/animal community.

M³ can also refer to the 3 collaborators: Mike Quinn, who participated for many years in valley-wide ecological concerns, has answered myriad “what’s this bug” questions in his current role as Invertebrate Biologist at Texas Parks and Wildlife. Karen Oberhauser has extensive

experience teaching young students about the Monarch/Milkweed “community.” I suspect that Ba Rea has provided the obvious skill for selecting, formatting and editing precision and excellence.

As a whole, *M³* is gorgeous. This book can be ordered from Bas Relief Pub. Group, P.O. Box 426, Glenshaw, PA 15116

Milkweeds and the LRGV

The first impression of many is that Tropical Milkweed (*Asclepias curassavica*) is the only plant of significance to Monarch butterflies. Fortunately, this is not the case. *A. curassavica* is pretty, so you see it in many butterfly photographs. In many gardens, this plant is eaten to oblivion by caterpillars, leaving obvious holes in the planned landscape.

My vote for utilizing milkweed species is to use them in a wildscape. There, things are expected

to wax and wane, celebration occurs when leaves are eaten, and overall diversity is the desired end product.

A number of choices await you in this regard. Various milkweed species are host plants for Soldiers and Queens, in addition to the lovely Monarch.

Contrary to popular opinion, we have small populations of Monarch and Queen butterflies which hatch out almost throughout the year after heavy watering or actual rainfall. A photograph I made of a freshly-hatched Soldier butterfly was taken in spring.

For more information on the varied milkweed species residing in the valley, I refer you to the Native Plant Project’s newly-published handbook. *Butterfly Gardening with Native Plants of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, TX.*



Hierba de Zizotes, herbaceous milkweed found in old field and coastal roadways



Cynanchum barbigerum, Thicket Threadvine on Prickly Pear



Queen larva munching on Twine Vine, *Sarcostemma cynanchoides*, a preferred host



Wet, newly-hatched Soldier. Hostplants include several milkweed species.

Part 2

Some Native Milkweed Species, Recognition & Use

by Christina Mild

Milkweeds typically produce an elongated seed-bearing pod, which opens lengthwise along a slit. Each seed is carried aloft by the wind, suspended by a silky parachute of fluff. Birds sometimes carry the fluff to their nest, unwittingly aiding the plant's dispersal.

An injured milkweed plant will ooze white latex sap, which is often unpleasantly smelly. This sap contains a cardiac glycoside, an alkaloid, which is toxic to birds and mammals.

The bloom of some milkweed species is quite complex, requiring a specific insect pollinator. Most milkweed species are "self-incompatible," which means that pollen from another plant is required for successful fertilization.

Here are a few of our native milkweeds and some of their useful attributes.

Cynanchum barbigerum, Thicket Threadvine.

This is a teeny, tiny vine best described as wiry in thickness and strength. It is the host plant for the Variegated Fritillary butterfly.

It's unlikely that you'll find this plant for sale in a nursery, as it is so diminutive in size. What it lacks in size, it makes up for in beauty and adaptation. At times, it seems that every shrub in an Arroyo Brush thicket is covered in the delicate white blooms of this remarkable vine.

It is of a size which would not threaten even the smallest of shrubs, and does well growing over such diverse surfaces as Prickly Pear and Christmas Cactus (Tasajillo).

My suggestion is to collect seed from this tiny vine and plant it near supporting shrubs, fences or a decorative trellis.

(The preceding and following vines were photographed together, giving a visual comparison.)

Pearl Milkweed Vine (pg. 4), *Matelia reticulata*. Leaves of this climbing milkweed are rather large, softly-fuzzy and deeply notched at the top. Seed of this vine has germinated easily

in various Harlingen soils, but growth of the vine has proven to be slow. One might see this as a positive attribute in a vine!

The delicate green flowers of this vine are five-pointed, with a central glistening disc. These five points, corolla lobes, are adorned with fine markings, "reticulations."

The large seedpods (follicles) of this milkweed are covered with soft spine-like projections.

This is a plant for humans who admire delicate features, rather than demanding plants with large and brightly-colored blooms.

Queen and Monarch butterflies utilize this vine as a host plant.

Talayote, *Cynanchum racemosum*.

This glabrous vine is a smooth-leaf double for *Matelia reticulata* above.

Seedpods on this vine are large and smooth rather than spiny.

Talayote makes a gorgeous blanket for a shrub, if the shrub it covers is something you'd rather not see. The delicate whitish-green flowers are intricate and very pretty.

Mike Heep routinely grows this pretty milkweed vine. It is utilized as a host plant by the Queen and Soldier butterflies.

Twine Vine, *Sarcostemma cynanchoides*

My name for this vine was invented because I can't remember the scientific name, despite great effort. Smelly Heartleaf Umbrella Bloom vine is long, but quite descriptive.

This is a vine which many people hate with passion. The good news is that you'll probably have no need to buy the plant or even to collect the seed (although I have).

Where does this vine emerge? In rose gardens. Blanketing your favorite delicate shrub. Weighing down your prized Tulipan del Monte. In short, anywhere and everywhere you water.

As Ken King points out, it also emerges from tiny patches of parched soil, to form an attractive drape from an angled tension wire in otherwise drab parking lots. It can attractively blanket a cyclone fence. Ken's opinion regarding cyclone fences: "they're all ugly."

At Ramsey Park, we encourage this rapidly-growing vine to cover brush piles, bringing a bit of beauty and diversity to an excellent, but messy-looking habitat. Prolific leafy growth covered one such brush pile throughout the summer. Now, in winter, leaves

are virtually absent. Numerous larvae munched on that pile for several months, and the nearby flowers were aflutter with Queens and the occasional Monarch. The Queen, Soldier and Monarch utilize this vine as a hostplant. Harlequin bugs and other interesting creatures frequent the vine, as well.

This is not an exclusive list of milkweeds native to this area. If nothing described here takes your fancy, there is still hope that another milkweed species will be to your liking. Planting a milkweed, or allowing it to grow where it pops up, is sure to enliven any garden.

Christina Mild hold a MS degree in botany and writes weekly newspaper articles on LRGV native plants.



above: *Cynanchum racemosum*. Note the smooth leaves and tiny, five-pointed starlike blooms.

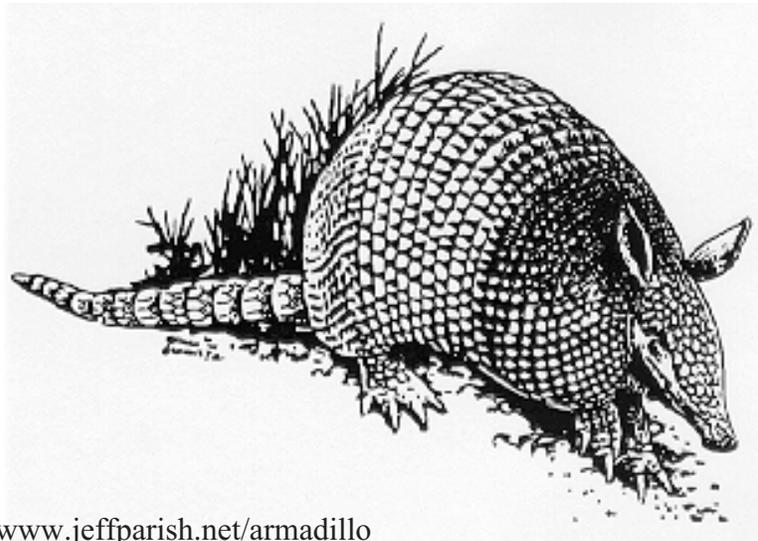
Pearl Milkweed Vine,
Matelia reticulata,
photographed in Arroyo
Colorado brush understory.



ARMADILLO

When Armadillo sticks his nose
In other creatures' lodges,
Secure in military plate,
He seldom ever dodges
Ocelots or angry dogs
Or little boys who tease him.
He digs for grubs and tiny worms
And other things that please him.
Turn your head, you ancient beast,
And look behind your shoulder.
Leap into your darkened den
Or you'll never be much older!

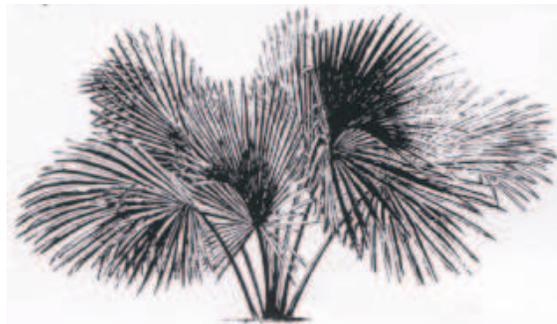
-- William MacWhorter



Native Plant Rescue: The Valley Nature Center will rescue native plants about to be destroyed by construction companies, developers, or no longer wanted by home owners. Call 956-969-2475.

Exclusively Native plant sources:

Benito Trevino, Landscaper/Grower, Rio Grande City 956-487-4626
Valley Nature Center – Native Plants, Weslaco 956-969-2475
Mother Nature’s Creations, Harlingen 956-428-4897
Heep’s Nursery, Harlingen 956-457-6834



Nature Happenings in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas

McAllen Great Outdoors Nature Series, McAllen Chamber of Commerce— The great outdoors nature series at 6:00 pm continues in March. March 28, Janis Lentz, Monarch Migration.

McAllen’s, Texas Tropics Nature Festival— Thursday, March 30 through Sunday, April 2 will be held at the Sheraton Four Points Hotel.

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 Bentson 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 go to 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 of the park. 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 *The Sabal* and our 5 handbooks on the website:

www.nativeplantproject.org

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Native Plant Project Membership Application

___ 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 G. Lester @ 956-425-4005 or g_lester48@msn.com

Native Plant Project Meetings – March 28, 2006. **Board meeting** at 6:30 pm; **General meeting** at 7:30pm featuring: Jesus Franko, with Texas Parks and Wildlife, presenting Native Plant Landscapes: Effects on use by wildlife.

Board and General Meeting 2006:

January 24 May 23
February 28 September 26
March 28 October 24
April 25 November 28

Board Meeting Only 2006:

June 27 July 25 August 22

Summary of the Minutes of the NPP Board Meeting on Feb. 28, 2006. The NPP booth at the Ocelot Festival was very successful. The \$33 raised was donated to the festival. The Handbook Sales Agreement with the Valley Nature Center was approved. The NPP will have a booth at the Texas Tropics Nature Festival in McAllen March 30 - April 2.

Native Plant Project
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