



The Sabal

www.nativeplantproject.org

Greetings, Fellow Native Plant Enthusiast!

by Martin Hagne

It was with great humility that I accepted the position of President of the Native Plant Project. Following in the great footsteps of such plant experts as Joe Ideker and, more recently, Gene Lester will be no easy task! The organization is left in great shape from the leadership of Gene, and a very dedicated board. The NPP has always been a group that has drawn wonderful volunteers having much expertise in the native plant communities of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. The organization's purpose is as true and needed today as ever before! Threats to the area's native habitat and their plants are a real danger, and we are losing acre after acre of plants.

On the other side, I have seen great strides in the right direction in the past two years.

More and more private individuals are finding out about the great importance of planting native species of plants in yards, businesses, parks, and schools. The NPP can be proud to have been a big part of this new and much needed trend. Many local and national organizations strive for the protection, understanding, and use of those very special plants that belong to our area. The NPP has always been in the forefront of such efforts, and every member, volunteer, and board member who ever belonged or served should be commended for their efforts!!

Let's continue to work hard for these plants that we all love so much! Join me in another great year of the NPP!! There is much to celebrate with the release of new NPP plant booklets, native plant sales, the Sabal newsletter, and informative presentations at the monthly meetings.

Remember, Plants are People, too!! Well, OK, not quite, but they are important!

History of an Urban Oasis

by Martin Hagne

The History of the Valley Nature Center begins, to some extent, in the early 1930's when in the wake of the Great Depression families sought work and refuge in the Rio Grande Valley, and shortly thereafter winter travel became a popular trend. After the land was donated by J.J. Gibson and William Henry Hoge, the Lions Club adopted the project in 1934 and Gibson Park was developed from land that once served as a pasture. The City of Weslaco opened the park in 1936 as a "recreational park and RV camp site," with the current VNC building housing the meeting and recreation hall. The main building is today's VNC headquarters. It contains its administrative offices, as well as a gift shop, a meeting room (utilized by the Native Plant Project for meetings and presentations), a hands-on nature exhibit hall, and nature reference library.

In 1945 "Weslaco Trailer Park" was relocated and Gibson Park (named for the previous landowner who served as a City Commissioner from 1928 to 1942, and Wartime Mayor from 1943 to 1944) was designated as a public recreational park and children's play area. In the early to mid 1970's, the wooded land to the east was converted into a petting zoo known as the Weslaco Nature Park. The area had been kept free from development by the radio tower located there by the Valley's first radio station, KRGV. The park was completed largely due to Cecil Massey, the City Manager from 1963 to 1975, and other dedicated individuals. Funding for the petting zoo was supplied by Texas Parks & Wildlife. In the later 1970's the petting zoo was having some problems and was soon closed.

In 1984 a committee was formed by members of the Frontera Audubon Society to organize an educational nature facility to serve the Rio Grande Valley. The committee was "Chaired" by

Dr. Pauline James. The first President of the guiding board of the VNC was Richard Lehman, and the first Director was Cyndy Chapman. Since then the land has been leased to the VNC by the City of Weslaco. In November of 1984, the Valley Nature Center received its certificate of incorporation. It became the first privately owned 501(c)3 non-profit environmental education nature center in the Valley and remains so today. Within two years the center was an independent organization. Board members were elected, and by-laws, policies, and programs were adopted. On July 1, 1987, the Valley Nature Center opened to the public.

"A secret garden in the heart of the Rio Grande Valley," the Center's mission is to increase knowledge of South Texas flora and fauna. It is hidden from view, surrounded by businesses and residential neighborhoods, and is truly a refuge in the center of town.

The nature park is located adjacent to the building and consists of six acres of recreated Mid-delta Thorn Forest, a biotic community of the Tamaulipan Mezquital Ecoregion. Features of the park include ponds, three quarters of a mile of walking trails, wildlife feeding stations, and butterfly and cactus gardens. These features, combined with the park's extensive native plant cover, make it a haven for area wildlife. Hundreds of volunteers and staff members have put in thousands of hours to create and maintain the wonderful diversity of native plants now making up the nature park. The VNC is a prime example of what a small area of land can do for preserving native plants and the animals that depend on them. I hope to expand on the native plants, exotic removal, and maintenance of the park in an article in the Sabal in the near future.

Martin Hagne, President of the NPP, is Managing Director of the Valley Nature Center, Weslaco, Texas

Common Landscaping Mistakes

by G. Owen Yost

A garden that neighbors envy is an ongoing process, not something achieved instantly. Along the way, we're bound to make a few mistakes, but we can learn from each other's errors. I've certainly made these mistakes in my early years as a Landscape Architect. But I try not to make them again. Maybe you can learn from my past errors.

Planting plants that get out of control: If you're planting trees and shrubs near the entry to your house or driveway, be sure to allow for their mature size. By all means, avoid putting plants in front of windows that will grow more than 6 to 8 feet, or that will need constant trimming.

Planting flowers at the base of trees: It's always shady under trees, and most flowers need a lot of sun. Lots of water will just slowly kill everything. I'd advise planting a shade-loving ground cover that needs very little care.

Planting too many species: Enthusiastic gardeners want one of everything. But if you have too many species, a garden becomes a mish-mash. A dozen of one kind of plant in a large mass has more visual impact than a dozen different plants scattered throughout your cultivated area. Repeat some of the same colors and species in another part of your yard to tie it together visually.

Watering too much: Some people are surprised to learn that many more plants die from drowning than from thirst. We usually don't need to water outdoor plants regularly. Water a plant only when it shows signs that it needs it. You'll learn to read a plant's signals. For example, the leaves of many plants droop when they need water.

Shallow watering: Rather than giving plants daily sips of water, soak the soil thoroughly and deeply when appropriate.

Paying too much attention to your plant:

Most of us (myself included) tend to hover over our plants, expecting instant gratification for something we've done, like fertilizing or pruning. Constant attention and continuous alteration of growing conditions prevents the plant from resting and getting accustomed to its environment. Benign neglect is often advisable.

Planting too deeply: A tree needs to have a "basal flare"-a widening of the trunk near the ground. If your tree looks more like a telephone pole, it's planted too deeply. Plant all trees and shrubs at the same level as they grew in nature or at the nursery. Never dig a planting hole deeper than the root ball-the roots should sit on undisturbed dirt so they won't settle below their normal depth over time.

Neglecting mature trees: A large, mature tree "makes" a landscape, especially in Texas, where shade is at a premium. Such a tree needs a little human care in a world of pollution, soil compaction, house remodeling, etc. At the very least, the tree's soil needs aeration every few years.

Trying to grow plants in poor subsoil: Builders and developers sometimes scrape away the topsoil, leaving only inorganic subsoil, which has no plant nutrients. Mix in composted organic matter (shredded tree trimmings, old shredded leaves, etc.) if your soil is poor. Natural material is better than chemical fertilizers.

Lifting or topping trees: Many homeowners get sold on the erroneous notion that whacking off the tops of trees spurs growth. The truth is, removing all or part of a treetop encourages rapid decay and decline. It also weakens the branches, making them susceptible to disease and breakage.

Clearing all the "weedy growth" from around trees also harms trees. That stuff lowers the ground temperature several degrees, encouraging the tree's growth. It also keeps water use down.

"Cleaning up" plant debris: A moderate amount of plant debris (dead grass, leaves,

twigs, etc.) should be left on the ground, instead of raking it all away. Organic matter cools the ground, discourages weed growth and conserves water. After decomposition, it becomes good soil.

Removing all dead or dying trees: A dead tree is probably somebody's home. Many species of birds live in dead trees, and exist on the bugs found there. So if a tree is going to fall on your house, cut it down. But if not, consider leaving it alone - consider planting a vine on it and planting a new tree a few feet away.

Expecting a plant to fix a non-plant problem: A few years ago, I had a client who believed that a clump of willow trees

would eliminate his drainage problem. Just sop it up. Not so. If you have a drainage problem, fix the drainage by addressing it directly, then choose the plants.

If you sidestep the mistakes listed above, you should wind up with a yard that the neighbors envy.

Owen Yost is a Landscape Architect, former president of the Trinity Forks (Denton) NPSOT chapter, and co-owner of Denton's *Wild Bird Center*. Mr. Yost specializes in designing low-maintenance, bird-friendly landscapes incorporating native plants. This article is reprinted from The Native Plant Society of Texas Newsletter with permission. Mr. Yost can be contacted at his Denton office: call 940-382-2099 or e-mail yost87@charter.net.



Willacy County Condemnation Attempt

by Lisa Williams

There is a very pressing and important issue happening in Willacy County right now. This is a real threat to nature in the Valley and is really a huge travesty!

You may have heard that Willacy County and the Willacy County Navigation District are attempting to condemn and acquire The Nature Conservancy's South Padre Island Preserve under the rule of eminent domain. Knowing that you have been long-time supporters of nature (and I am sure, supports the Conservancy in their efforts), I believe that you would be willing to help them dissuade Willacy County from condemning the Conservancy's preserve on South Padre Island.

The Conservancy is asking you to contact the media by writing letters to the editor and/or op-eds. They (and I) would also like you to write letters and/or call Willacy County officials, the Governor, the Lieutenant Governor, and state and U.S. Congresspersons representing Willacy, Cameron, Hidalgo and Starr counties. Additionally, please help get the word out to fellow nature lovers in any way you can.

In order to help generate awareness about this issue, the Conservancy has put together a communications kit. Email lwilliams@tnc.org for the information kit. In the kit you will find more information about the whole issue.

The kit includes:

- Messages about this issue
- The Nature Conservancy's position paper
- The Nature Conservancy's op-ed
- The Nature Conservancy's letter to the editor
- Tips for writing letters and e-mails
- Media and government contact information
- Map of the South Padre Island Preserve
- Houston Chronicle and San Antonio Express-News clips

The Conservancy appreciates any assistance you may be able to provide in bringing attention to this issue. If you have any questions about these materials or would like more information, please do not hesitate to contact Lisa Williams at the Conservancy. Her contact info is below.

Lisa Williams
Tamaulipan Thornscrub Project Director
The Nature Conservancy
P.O. Box 6281
McAllen, TX 78502-6281
Phone: 956/580-4241 Fax: 956/584-2052

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 7, Keith Hackland, Nature Tourism in South Texas; March 14, Roy Rodriguez, Birds of NE Mexico, Tamaulipas, El Cielo; March 21, Collen Hooks, History & Wildlife of the Quinta Mazatlan; March 28, Janis Lentz, Monarch Migration.

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

Native Plant Project Board of Directors:

Martin Hagne - President
- Vice President

Ann Treece Vacek - Secretary

Bert Wessling - Treasurer

Diann Ballesteros

Sue Griffin

Chris Hathcock

Michael Heep

Ken King

Gene Lester

Sande Martin

Eleanor Mosimann

Kathy Sheldon

Sue Sill

Anne Arundel Thaddeus

Benito Trevino

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.

Name _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

E-mail address _____

New Renewal Address Change

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 – February 28, 2006. **Held, this month only, at Bentson Rio Grande State Park/ World Birding Center Board meeting** at 6:30 pm; **General meeting** at 7:30pm featuring: Chris Hathcock, the park’s habitat restoration biologist, will show us the existing woodland plant communities and all the progress he’s made transforming farm land into native woodland and gardens. His talk is called “Past, Present and Future Woodlands of Bentsen State Park”. **Call (956)584-9156; [www.worldbirdingcenter.org/Bentson Rio Grande StatePark/find your way for directions](http://www.worldbirdingcenter.org/Bentson_Rio_Grande_StatePark/find_your_way_for_directions).**

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 JAN. 24, 2006. The NPP will have a booth at the Ocelot Festival in Harlingen on Feb. 11. Children will be transplanting a native plant from a planting band to a 1 gallon pot. At the Annual General Meeting, the following Directors were re-elected by acclamation: Mike Heep, Kathy Sheldon, Sue Sill, Benito Trevino, and Ann Vacek.

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

