



The Sabal

www.nativeplantproject.org

Native Lantana Species of the LRGV

by Martin Hagne
Valley Nature Center

Most folks love lantanas for their abundant blooms and rich colors. Others enjoy them for being such great butterfly attracting plants. No matter what makes you want to plant lantanas in your landscape, there are quite a few native species to choose from. If color and flash is all you want then not to worry, but if you want to attract those fluttering butterflies you better stick to native species. Many varieties sold at nurseries are “engineered” and offer no value to our wildlife, being sterile and having no nectar.

Luckily we have six native species in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, all small deciduous shrubs, and all great nectar plants. Well, at least they once were listed as six separate species. Some have now been lumped together as one species

with two varieties. And one species ethnicity is hotly debated... is it native or not? No consensus seems to be found as of yet. But for this article let's explore these six lantanas as if they were all separate species and all being native. A few side notes will let you know the issues at hand of lumping and being native or not.

One of the most colorful and abundant species of lantana in the area is the Texas Lantana, *Lantana urticoides* (previously known as *Lantana horrida*). It is easily recognized in the group of six with its yellow gold and orange red blooms. It is a show stopper in any yard and equally so out in the wild brush country. Besides being good for nectaring butterflies it also feeds some birds (and undoubtedly small mammals as well) with its small black fruits. It grows quite woody at the base and main stems and can become a good six feet tall and equally sized across.



Texas Lantana, *Lantana urticoides* (previously known as *Lantana horrida*)



Desert Lantana, or *Lantana macropoda*, in white (left) and pink (above) color forms.

Texas Lantana has fairly large leaves growing up to about two and a quarter inches long, dark green, with coarsely toothed edges, and seems hairy on the top surface. The leaves have a fairly strong smell when crushed and therefore its original scientific name, *horrida*. Blooms normally grow from new growth so a healthy trimming should be done each year after the flowering season ends in December. Don't be afraid of cutting back the plant to about two feet from the ground as it grows vigorously if water is available. It grows well in full sun as well as partial shade in well drained soils, and it is drought tolerant.

A close cousin to the Texas Lantana is the West Indian Lantana, *Lantana camara*. This is the one species that many think is not native to our area. It is found in the West Indies, hence its name, and several other parts of the world. However, some do believe it is native. It is certainly "naturalized" and well established all through the area and even found in the wild. It has been reported for at least 100 years in the area. The West Indian Lantana is also very showy with yellow and pink flowers. It grows very similarly to the Texas and very similar in size and requirements. If anything, its leaves are slightly larger at times. White-tailed deer sometimes will browse the leaves, and it attracts butterflies and some birds. Its leaves are said to be poisonous to livestock, as is the Texas Lantana.

Desert Lantana, or *Lantana macropoda*, is a much smaller shrub with slender stems and branches. This plant usually grows to about two or three feet tall, but can grow to four and half feet. It sports many white flowers in nice clusters. Some plants have more of a violet purple flower with yellow centers. In the wild it often seems that the populations are segregated between the white and violet flowering individuals. This species has now been lumped with Brushland Lantana as one species. But the Brushland Lantana still, to me, shows slightly different leaf structure and flower clusters,

which always seem to be white. Desert Lantana has small, medium green leaves that grow to about one and three quarter inches long and are often lanceolate (long ovals). The leaves are sharply toothed at the margins and hairy. It is a good nectaring plant and some birds feed on its berries. It likes full sun, well drained soil, and is very drought tolerant.

Brushland Lantana, *Lantana achyranthifolia*, is very similar to the Desert Lantana but is listed as growing up to six feet tall. The Desert Lantana has now been lumped with this species, and I have seen them named as either Brushland or Desert Lantana using the scientific name of *Lantana achyranthifolia*. The Brushland Lantana seems to me to have leaves with less marked teeth on its margins, larger leaves than Desert which are up to three inches long and more oval shaped. Its' flowers are normally white. I have never seen an identifiable Brushland plant with the violet flowers that some Desert Lantanas have, but that is just my opinion. Otherwise they are very similar to Desert Lantana and are good nectaring plants, while some birds feed on the berries. It is reportedly the host plant of the Gray Metalmark, used by those species females to lay their eggs. It likes full sun, well drained soil, and is very drought tolerant.

Across most of the Valley the Hammock Lantana, *Lantana canescens* (previously *Lantana microcephala*) is less abundant, but in some areas it is the dominant species growing in large numbers. This shrub can grow up to seven and a half feet, but normally is found to be around three to four feet tall in the wild. Like all the other lantanas it is very aromatic when brushed up against or the leaves are crushed. Its medium to light green leaves have a slight gray or silver shade to them at times, and they are only slightly toothed. The leaves are narrower than the other species of lantanas in the area and therefore appear longer and pointed. They are also often slightly folded in along the main vein

creating a slight V shape. Its flowers are white with yellow centers and clustered like the other species. This plant can handle various soil types and drainage. It likes a bit more shade, growing well in partial sun, but can handle full sun to a lesser extent. It is a very good nectaring plant.

The last species found in our area of the Lower Rio Garden Valley was up until recently unknown to the area. Native plant nurseryman Mike Heep from Harlingen found it growing along the brushy banks of the Arroyo Colorado. The Velvet Lantana, *Lantana velutina*, was then found along the Willacy and Cameron County line by the author in a small remnant brush tract. Since then it has been found in a very few other locations in the eastern parts of the Valley. Velvet Lantana can grow up to six feet tall but is normally found to be around three to four feet tall. It normally grows in a uniform rounded shape. And that, along with its flowering habits, makes it a very nice landscaping plant. The flowers are white and clustered, and the plant often blooms profusely after receiving water. Its leaves appear fuzzy to the touch and eye, and after looking closely you can see that they are ridged across the leaf. The dark green leaves can become up to one and three quarters inches long, but are often shorter and are somewhat silvery gray underneath. At times the leaves can turn a darkish purple. Its flowers are often white or white mixed with violet purple. The somewhat fleshy fruits are smaller than peas and turn a nice blackish purple when ripe. This species seems to like growing conditions similar to the Hammock Lantana with partial to full sun and fairly heavy soils. It is an excellent butterfly attractor, and birds and small mammals surely must use the fruits.

I could think of no better deserving native plants than the lantanas to plant in your landscape. Beautiful colors, nice texture, nice size, able to be trimmed, good flower production, drought

tolerant, and wildlife friendly. What more could you ask for!

Martin Hagne is President of the Native Plant Project in addition to being Executive Director of the Valley Nature Center, 301 S. Border Ave. Weslaco, Texas 78596.



Above, West Indian Lantana, *Lantana camera*. Photo courtesy of Christina Mild.



Brushland Lantana, *Lantana achyranthifolia* (above), Hammock Lantana, *Lantana canescens* (previously *Lantana microcephala*) to the right, and Velvet Lantana, *Lantana velutina*, showing both the white (lower left) and pink color forms below. The butterfly nectaring on the Velvet Lantana's white colored flowers is a White Peacock. Learn more about which native plants attract butterflies by viewing our NPP Butterfly Gardening handbook at nativeplantproject.org



Nature Happenings Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas

For a comprehensive calendar of Nature Happenings go to **RGV Nature Coalition** at www.rgvnaturecoalition.org Scroll down to and click on Nature Events Calendar on right side.

Edinburg Scenic Wetlands and World Birding Center — Birding, butterflies, caterpillars, bats, and photography programs, 714 Raul Longoria Rd., Edinburg, TX.
Call Marisa (956) 381-9922 or go to www.edinburgwbc.org for schedule.

Quinta Mazatlan - McAllen Wing of the World Birding Center— 600 Sunset Ave., McAllen, TX. Call Colleen Hook (956) 688-3370 for scheduled events.

Bentsen Rio Grande Valley State Park WBC offers butterfly walks, bird walks, nature tours. Call 956-584-9156 for details and times.

Santa Ana NWR near Alamo offers **Nature Tram rides** with Interpreters at 9:30 a.m., 12 noon and 2:00 p.m. every day (956) 784-7500.

Valley Nature Center (956) 969-2475 301 S. Border Ave., Weslaco, TX.

Estero Llano Grande State Park WBC - 3301 International Blvd. (FM 1015) in Weslaco, TX. Call (956) 565-3919 for scheduled events.

Valley Proud Environmental Council from bagging grass clippings to Captain Crab puppet shows. Call Laura Maxwell (956) 412-8004, vpec@sbcglobal.net or visit www.valleyproud.org.

NEW: At NPP meetings, you will now be able to purchase native plants grown at the Perez Ranch Nursery and VNC. It's planting time in the Valley. Encourage birds and butterflies to stop at your backyard by growing their native (foods) plants.

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The Sabal is the Newsletter of the Native Plant Project and conveys information on the native habitat, 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 @ 956-682-0549, or g-el1951@sbcglobal.net**

See *The Sabal* and our 5 handbooks on our 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 G. Lester (956)-682-0549; g-el1951@sbcglobal.net

Native Plant Project Meetings – January 27, 2009. **Board meeting** at 6:30 p.m.; **General meeting** at 7:30 p.m. **James H. Everitt**, co-author of the three native plant guidebooks that are recommended reading for anyone who lives in the Valley, will present “Cacti of the Lower Rio Grande Valley”. Mark your calendars – this is a “don’t miss” program.

Board and General Meetings 2009:

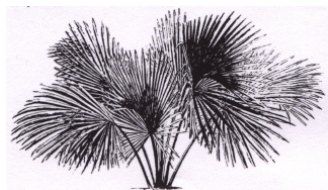
2009: January 27 February 24 March 24 April 28 May 26
September 22 October 27 November 24

SUMMARY OF THE MINUTES OF THE BOARD MEETING – NOV 25, 2008

The NPP will co-sponsor the Invaders of Texas Workshop, a 1-day event to be held in the LRGV in April. A suggestion that native plants be sold during NPP general meetings was well-received. King reported on a potentially undescribed *Convolvulus* sp. that he and others had discovered north of San Manuel.

It's January. Don't forget to send your Membership dues.

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