



Christina Mild
RIO DELTA WILD

FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name:

Aloysia macrostachya

Common Names:

Sweet Stem, Vara Dulce

Family: Verbenaceae (Vervain)

Vara Dulce Means Sweet Stem

Ample rainfall throughout the LRGV during fall of 2003 has spurred new growth and flowering throughout the area. It's difficult to choose which direction to explore, as every traveler relates exciting adventures in yet a different place.

One of the most interesting recent posts on Texas Butterfly listserv is that of Derek Muschalek on his visit to Falcon

Lake State Park, November 2, 2003. Muschalek is phenomenal in his ability to identify plants and butterflies. He is also generous in sharing those observations by posting them on the listserv.

Muschalek observed and identified 34 species of blooming plants during his expedition. Most helpful to those who would create butterfly gardens, he also ranked the top eight of those plants for their attractiveness to nectaring insects. During his day of observation, Muschalek listed forty-eight species of butterflies and many individuals. It must have been a wondrous experience.

His number one nectar plant for November 2nd at Falcon Dam is the subject of this article: *Aloysia macrostachya*, Sweet Stem, *Vara dulce*. This is a thornless plant, with soft leaves. It will not overgrow a yard or reseed itself in every nook and cranny.

Sweet Stem is a nice addition to open sunny places. The growth I've seen most often extends delicately thin branches skyward. Such a growing form does not shade out lower-growing nectar plants in a butterfly garden. In contrast, one specimen at Weslaco's Valley Nature Center is compact, with many crowded branches and densely-arranged leaves.

Dr. Vines reports that *Aloysia macrostachya* has been recorded in these Texas counties: Webb, Duval, Zapata, Starr, Hidalgo and Cameron. In Mexico, it is reported in the states of Tamaulipas, Coahuila and San Luis Potosi. (*Trees, Shrubs and Woody Vines of the Southwest*, 1960.)

Vines also provides the origin of the name. *Aloysia* honors Maria Louisa, wife of Charles IV of Spain. The species name, *macrostachya*, means "large-spiked."

One does not often find the purple bloom spikes of this nectar plant in the wilds of Cameron County. It more commonly occurs further west and north, in sand and scrub, on gravel and limestone hills of the Rio Grande Plains and adjacent areas of northeastern Mexico.

Chihuahuan Desert Gardens' website recommends poor, dry, well-drained soils for this plant. They list it as "root hardy as far north as Austin." Their planting recommendations include: "low to medium water, full sun to part shade, well draining soils..."

The delicate nature of the plant, the beauty of the purple-red bloom spikes and the herbal aroma of crushed leaves are features which recommend *Vara Dulce* for landscaping purposes. Crushed leaves are reminiscent of thyme or oregano. It is too delicate to withstand high human impact, as the slender limbs are quite brittle. Placed at the center of shorter nectar plants, *Vara Dulce's* height would lend a central focal point.

Though *Vara Dulce* is not prolific in Cameron County, it grew very well adjacent to the main parking lot at Ramsey Park in Harlingen until it became buried beneath a pile of woodchip mulch. The truck's driver probably mistook it for a "weed."

A newly-planted *Vara Dulce* now grows within Ramsey near the entrance to McEnery Memorial Garden on the main caliche loop.

At Valley Nature Center in Weslaco, *Vara Dulce* adorns several sunny locations adjacent to trails. Due to plant rescue efforts, the Valley Nature Center has been able to offer limited numbers of the plant for sale in their Native Plant Nursery from time to time.

Vara dulce is currently underutilized in valley landscaping. For those who wish to grow a plant which is not commonly observed, this can be a good choice.

As a member of the Verbenaceae, this plant might also play host for a Common Buckeye or Theona Checkerspot butterfly.

Some of the nectar plants noted by Muschalek on his visit to Falcon State Park are even less appreciated, noticed or recognized by humans. They are, in order of Muschalek's ranking of insect nectaring preference: Stinging Cevallia (*Cevallia sinuata*), Shrubby Blue Sage (*Salvia ballotaeflora*), Taperleaf Heliotrope (*Heliotropium angiospermum*), Trailing Allionia (*Allionia incarnata*), Desert Lantana (*Lantana macropoda*), Woolly Tidestromia (*Tidestromia lanuginosa*) and Littleleaf Nama (*Nama parvifolium*).

Of the top nectar plants noted by Muschalek, Shrubby Blue Sage and Desert Lantana are the most widely available at our native plant nurseries. On November 18, butterflies were especially abundant on Shrubby Blue Sage at Santa Ana NWR and Valley Nature Center in Weslaco.

In closing, I should note how fortunate we are in Cameron and Hidalgo counties to have several reliable sources of native plants. Ann Mullen pointed out the total lack of native plant nurseries in the Kingsville area when she attended the birding festival in Harlingen during November. Mullen writes a nature column in the *Kingsville Record*. Sometimes an outsider's appreciation reminds us just how blessed we are.

Technical assistance by Mike Heep, native plant nurseryman and UTPA Instructor.

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