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**RIO DELTA WILD**

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**Oreja de Raton has three-part seed capsules and wavy leaf edges. Blooms are tiny.**



#### FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Bernardia myricifolia*

Common Names: Oreja de Raton, Mouse Ear

Family: Euphorbiaceae (Spurge)

#### **Mouse Ear Is Feast for Deer**

In South Texas and nearby Mexico, *Bernardia myricifolia* is commonly known as *Oreja de Raton*, translating to “Mouse Ear.” These leaves are similar to those of Myrtle, thus the species name *myricifolia*.

For those with little success in discriminating one plant from another, this shrub offers a glimmer of hope. Mouse Ear leaves are unique in this area in the softness of their backsides and their scalloped edges.

Under magnification, hairs upon the plant have a star-like appearance.

On one government-sponsored website, the common name of this *Bernardia* is listed as “mouse’s eye.” (USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service)

I’ve often asked Mike Heep about the extraordinary names I find for local plants in non-local resources. “Some guy who’s never seen the plant probably came up with that for a common name,” Heep has customarily replied. The government employee who came up with “mouse’s eye” was Spanish-language challenged, at the least.

After more reflection, however, it’s quite possible that this unnamed person noted the leaves’ appearance and compared them to a mouse’s ear. Who ever heard of a mouse, even from a cartoon or fairytale, with scalloped earlobes?

Perhaps this unnamed government employee noted that the seed of *Bernardia myricifolia* is about the size of a mouse’s eye.

In any case, *Oreja de Raton* remains one of my favorite plants. The light color and soft character of the leaf’s backside may remind you of a mouse’s ear. Nonetheless, I’ve not observed even timid people to scream or run away upon seeing them.

In a popularity contest among deer, this plant might win hands down. Max Pons (of Nature Conservancy’s Southmost Preserve, Brownsville, TX) says that deer regard *Bernardia* leaves “in about the same way that a human thinks about ice cream.” In spring, crude protein content of the leaves is 15-20%.

During the spring of 2004, I’ve observed at least three crops of seed, of good quantity, on plants in Harlingen. “Seed-eating birds such as quail, doves, cardinals and sparrows readily eat the seeds.” (“A Field Guide to Common South Texas Shrubs,” Taylor, Rutledge and Herrera, 1994.) “It is a food plant for butterfly larvae and a source of nectar for adult butterflies.”

The native plant website of TAMU lauds *Oreja de Raton* as a landscape shrub for south Texas. It is thornless, relatively cold-hardy and well-adapted to heat and drought. Average height and width ranges between three and eight feet, a good size for many small landscapes.

Mike Heep recommends Mouse Ear for planting throughout the Lower Rio Grande Valley area. Unlike many plants which are finicky regarding drainage or a particular soil, this one is rather adaptable.

The range of *Oreja de Raton* extends from the Rio Grande Plains north to Central Texas and south to Tamaulipas, Nuevo Leon, and Coahuila, Mexico.

It isn't easy to find this shrub in the wild or in the native plant nursery, perhaps because the high-nitrogen leaves are rapidly consumed by browsers and ranchers are keen on planting it.

Harlingen's system of parks along the Arroyo Colorado holds a number of specimens of this attractive shrub. Because the native brush within those wild places is not subjected to grazing pressure, some desirable species occur there in greater numbers than in similar stands of brush elsewhere.

*Bernardia myricifolia* is in the Euphorbia family, one of few plant families which bear characteristics I'm able to comprehend and remember.

The seedpods of this family are typically in three parts. Mouse Ear seed capsules have three chambers, with one seed in each. Sometimes, of course, not all are fertilized and one-seed or two-seed capsules are the result.

Seeds are borne only on female plants. Separate male and female plants bear tiny flowers which are delicately attractive, but not showy.

The seedpods turn brown as they mature and will pop open, especially on hot and humid days, flinging seed away from the parent plant.

While the seed capsules of Euphorbia are predictable characteristics, other features are not. Some plants in this family are commonly referred to as cacti, as they have much-reduced leaves, fleshy stems and thorny protection.

Mike Heep relates that seedlings of *Bernardia myricifolia* are susceptible to "damping off."

Ken King (Frontera Audubon volunteer from Weslaco) tells me that seed I collected several years ago has been recently germinated with success by Martin Hagne (Director of Weslaco's Valley Nature Center).

Many times we believe that seed may be too "old" to plant. Yet I keep reading accounts of specific seeds which have "delayed germination" periods or very specific germination requirements.

Master Naturalist Diann Ballesteros of Harlingen told me recently about wildflower seed which took two years to germinate in her yard, despite ample water and excellent growing conditions.

Mike Heep tells me that time and time again he gives up on some seed ever sprouting, flings a pot's contents into some corner, and finds a healthy plant growing there months later.

On the whole, humans aren't known for patience.

Technical assistance by Mike Heep, native plant nurseryman and UTPA Instructor. Mrs. Mild holds a Masters degree in Biological Sciences. She may be contacted at RioDeltaWild@aol.com.