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RIO DELTA WILD

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White underside of Chomonque leaves contrasts with shiny dark green on top.



FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Gochnatia hypoleuca*

Common Names: Chomonque, Ocote

Family: Asteraceae (Daisy)

Chomonque Is a Butterfly-Attracting Shrub

Ethel and Rey Cantu enjoy the many butterflies which visit a large Chomonque near their backdoor in Rancho Viejo. The Cantus have created a wildlife oasis which surrounds their home. They are also kind enough to share that lovely space on occasion with groups of visitors. On April 24th, I was among such a lucky group.

The Chomonque growing in the Cantu's backyard had finished blooming, and we were able to observe the seed.

That specimen is one of few Chomonques growing in cultivation.

"Butterflies are always around Chomonque when it's blooming," Ethel told us.

The blooming period is rather long, from October through February. This is perfect timing for butterfly migration.

December through January is a time when many other LRGV native plants are not in bloom. Chomonque in a butterfly garden could fill that time gap, supplying nectar when it is not abundant elsewhere.

San Antonio Botanical Garden (SABG) promotes Chomonque on their website as a shrub well-suited to extremes of south Texas weather. It is an attractive evergreen. Leaf surfaces are glossy and very dark green on top, with contrasting white felt-like undersides. The species name, *hypoleuca*, refers to this white underside. SABG points out that Chomonque is drought and freeze resistant and thrives with little attention.

Butterflies which have been spotted visiting Chomonque at the San Antonio Botanical Garden include Painted Lady, Red Admiral, White Checkered Skipper and the Great Purple Hairstreak.

For those who have not visited SABG, it is well worth one's time. During visits to San Antonio, my husband and daughter prefer to stand in line at such attractions as Fiesta Texas. My preference is to walk quietly amongst the plants at SABG. It's an excellent bird and butterfly-

watching spot. There are frequent postings about winged creature sightings at SABG posted on the Texas Butterfly and Bird-watching listservs.

It is unlikely that you'll see Chomonque growing in the wild, even in the LRGV. It is "infrequent on gravel and caliche cuestas in extreme south Texas." It occurs in the counties of Duval, Hidalgo, Jim Hogg, Starr and Zapata. In Mexico, the range includes Nuevo Leon and Coahuila south to the states of Queretaro and Hidalgo. (Correll & Johnston, "Manual of the Vascular Plants of South Texas," 1979.)

Chomonque appears on the plant species list for Chihuahua Woods prepared years ago by Joe Ideker. The Nature Conservancy has that species list posted on their website in .pdf format, which allows easy searching to determine which plant species live there. It takes some time to open a .pdf document, but it's often worth waiting for.

The blooms of Chomonque aren't striking, though they are mildly fragrant. They're small and cream-colored. Small size and lack of bright coloration make no difference to butterflies in search of food. The size or color of a bloom has little relationship to how good a nectar source it is.

The seeds of Chomonque resemble those of various mistflowers, plants with similar delicate composite blooms which are butterfly favorites.

Chomonque is an example of an uncommonly-encountered shrub. I'm not certain that I've ever seen it in the wild. Though the SABG website claims this shrub to be easily propagated, Mike Heep disagrees. It's uncommon enough that Heep has a difficult time even finding mature specimens for cuttings.

If the plant could be propagated in sufficient quantity, it might be ideal for local landscaping.

It has some interesting attributes, as well. "The leaves when chewed will numb your tongue." Heep tells me. "Macedonio Lopez showed me that. He also claims that a tea of this plant will help an upset stomach." Macedonio Lopez is an LRGV native with a keen interest in and knowledge of local plants. He has graciously shared that knowledge with Heep and others over many years.

In summary, Heep says this: "Great shrub, but not all that easy to propagate."

I suppose we'll have to settle for other butterfly garden plants in the meantime. *Eupatorium azureum*, Blue Boneset, is a pretty and herbaceous plant with a similar blooming period. I doubt that it will numb your tongue or cure a stomach ache. It will bloom nicely and bring butterfly visitors, once established.

There is an excellent resource for learning which native plants are good nectar sources and host plants for butterflies. An extensive list has been created by Mike Quinn. Quinn is an Entomologist with Texas Parks & Wildlife. He has recently revised and expanded that list. The update can be found at: http://www.naba.org/chapters/nabast/plants_info.pdf. Remember, it's easy to search for specific words in this type of file. Just click on the tiny binoculars in the top tool bar. Then type in the name of the plant you're interested in. If it is known to provide nectar or larval food, the search tool will highlight the plant's name where it appears in Quinn's ten-page document.

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Dried Seedheads on Gochnatia.