

Tree Tobacco blooms at Visitor's Center, Palo Alto Battlefield.



FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Nicotiana glauca*

Common Names: Tree Tobacco

Family: Solanaceae

Tree Tobacco Grows Along the Rio Grande

When we've seen a plant throughout our lifetime, we often think of it as being native to the area in which it grows. Knowing which plants are native and which are not is no easy task.

Where I grew up in Southern Illinois, many of the plants I regarded as "belonging there" were imports like Japanese Honeysuckle and Crown Vetch.

Those who grew up seeing Tree Tobacco in "wild and remote" places of South Texas have probably regarded the plant as native. In fact, many of the plants which have become naturalized here were introduced to the area more than one hundred years ago. Reproducing themselves successfully in the wild, these plants are regarded by many of the valley's oldest citizens as a natural part of the landscape.

Historically, *Nicotiana glauca*, Tree Tobacco, is native to Argentina and Paraguay. Today, you'll find it growing along the Rio Grande, as well as in many other areas.

This yellow-blooming shrub with bluish leaves was introduced in Hawaii as early as 1864. I would guess that it was introduced to the LRGV even earlier. It is now abundant in waste places, old walls, dry river beds, roadsides and along river banks in many countries.

It is considered invasive in Mexico, Southern Africa, Israel, Australasia and Europe.

Dr. Vines describes a whole range of ways in which the plant has been used medicinally. Poultices of the leaves, for example, were used to relieve headaches. (Robert A. Vines, "Trees, Shrubs, and Woody Vines of the Southwest," 1960.)

Anabasina, an alkaloid similar to nicotine, is one of the active compounds produced by Tree Tobacco. This same compound is found in smoking tobacco.

All parts of the Tree Tobacco are poisonous. A forensics report on the worldwide web documents poisoning in two Thai workers. They cooked and ate the leaves, mistaking them for a widely-used herb. Both suffered a wide range of ghastly symptoms. Only one of the two survived after medical treatment.

The plant is also poisonous to cattle, sheep and horses.

A mature specimen of Tree Tobacco can produce from 10,000 to 1,000,000 seeds. These are chiefly spread by the wind. A range of environmental extremes are tolerated.

“Weird tree,” remarks Mike Heep, “in that it seems to like really lousy places to grow. I don’t really recall seeing any growing on good fertile land.”

Tree Tobacco grows in the newly-planted primarily-native landscaping which surrounds the Visitor Center at Palo Alto Battlefield. This newly-opened facility is operated by the National Park Service. Friendly staff, historical displays and video complement trails through native brush and coastal salt flat. There is no fee to visit the facility or the trails.

Palo Alto Battlefield is an excellent place to behold the varied colors of blooming prickly pear. The blooms become more vibrant and variable as one approaches coastal areas of south Texas.

Another excellent place to venture is nearby Boca Chica beach. This was once a popular weekend destination for locals. Currently, few visitors go there. Thus, the botanical diversity is splendid. For those who appreciate coastal sands without commerce, I highly recommend a visit. Just remember to take everything you need with you, like water, sunscreen and bug repellent. Be on the lookout for rattlesnakes, as you’ll be visiting a place which is actually wild.

For those who own property in the coastal area, a newly-published guide is available for help in landscaping. Recommended native ground covers, wildflowers, shrubs and trees are included in the pamphlet. Nurseries which handle the plants are listed. To find out more about obtaining this free guide, call Valley Proud Environmental Council at 412-8004.

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