



Christina Mild
RIO DELTA WILD

Pellitory photograph by Christina Mild.

FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Parietaria pennsylvanica*

Common Names: Cucumber Plant,
Pennsylvania Pellitory

Family: Urticaceae (Nettle)

Where Do Red Admirals Come From?

Often my thoughts drift toward Joe Ideker, who preceded me in writing this column. When Joe passed away, I set out to stand in his footsteps. Joe left an incredible legacy. He was a pioneer in bringing native plants and their relationships with other living things into the limelight of popular attention.

Thus, this article will attempt to illuminate the sort of plant which Joe would notice, while most ignore it as a worthless “weed.”

I heard an excellent quote recently, spoken by a science teacher. “A weed,” he explained to other teachers, “should be defined as something brought here from elsewhere.”

We often forget that things which have always grown here should not be disregarded, as weeds. This, of course, is topsy-turvy logic for the agriculture industry upon which we all depend for food. Weed in a wildlife sanctuary must be defined differently than what is a weed at farming or ranching operations. Assigning things randomly to an overall “weed” list causes many conflicts.

On one memorable walk with Joe Ideker through Valley Nature Center’s nature park, Joe pointed out *Ortigailla*, Stinging Nettle. I’ve already written about that plant, pretty, but painful to encounter. Joe emphasized the value of *Ortigailla* as a butterfly host plant. Had I taken more walks with Joe, he likely would’ve pointed out Pennsylvania Pellitory, as well, and for the same reason.

Mike Quinn, Invertebrate Biologist for Texas Parks and Wildlife <mike.quinn@tpwd.state.tx.us> has compiled an excellent and comprehensive list: *Caterpillar Food Plants for the Rio Grande Valley*. It could be titled “Where Do Butterflies Come From?” as each listed plant determines the presence or absence of butterflies which feed upon it. Quinn’s list gives us a good guide for revegetation projects. Butterflies and their larvae feed many birds and other animals, as well as providing great visual spectacle for the human eye.

Because Quinn has formatted his list as an Adobe Acrobat file (.pdf file format), it is simple to search the document for the precise data one needs. For example, a person who wishes to attract Blomfield’s Beauty to the yard could search on the butterfly name. The search engine would highlight Blomfield’s Beauty where it appears in Quinn’s list, revealing the host plant that butterfly depends upon for successful reproduction.

The lowly Pennsylvania Pellitory provides food for larval stages of Blomfield’s Beauty and the Red Admiral.

While I’ve failed to even learn the name of this thornless plant for most of my life, it is quite useful to a whole range of wildlife.

The leaves are occasionally eaten by whitetail deer, according to Everitt, Drawe and Lonard, authors of *Broad-Leaved Herbaceous Plants of South Texas*, 1999.

Delena Tull provides yet another common name in *Edible and Useful Plants of Texas and the Southwest* (1987). “Cucumber Plant,” Tull relates, has a flavor “close to that of the garden cucumber...a refreshing addition to salads.” She discourages cooking, as the greens take on a bland taste, and recommends selecting the newest growth. The “hairs on older plants may be disagreeable to some people.”

Other sources refer to Pellitory as sticky, perhaps because of these epidermal “hairs.”

A web search on medicinal use of Pellitory brings forth a bit of confusion. Pellitory is also the common name of a woody Prickly Ash and a Chrysanthemum, each with a host of pharmaceutical properties. One never knows just which plant is included in any herbal remedy unless the genus

and species name are listed in the contents. In some cases, the pharmaceutical properties of different parts of the same plant are quite different.

The occurrence of the herbaceous and unarmed *Parietaria pennsylvanica* in North America is described by Correll and Johnston. "On shaded banks and about large boulders, uncommon in eastern and central Texas, north to the High Plains, (blooming) March to May; from Florida to Texas and Mexico, north to Ontario and British Columbia." (*Manual of the Vascular Plants of Texas*, 1979.)

Webster's Dictionary, 1913 edition, reveals the derivation of *Parietaria*, as relating to walls, the usual place where a related European species commonly occurs. I also find our *Parietaria* growing in places where a silt of fine humus has collected, frequently around barriers, like stepping stones.

The flowers of *Parietaria pennsylvanica* aren't noteworthy. They emerge from the stem, between each leaf node, as greenish clusters.

Stems are weak, thus plants may be erect, or reclining.

An annual species, *P. pennsylvanica* typically occurs in colonies, growing from shallow taproots. The small fruit is described as a brown, lustrous achene.

For those in search of butterfly larvae upon this plant, diligence may be required. John & Gloria Tveten describe the larvae of the Red Admiral. Though they encounter the Red Admiral in their own backyard through much of the year, they had not located the larvae when their book was published. (*Butterflies of Houston & Southeast Texas*, 1996.)

Other information provided by the Tveten's regarding the Red Admiral: When perched head-down on a tree trunk, their camouflage is almost perfect. Pale green barrel-shaped eggs are laid singly on leaves of host plants; several may be laid upon the same plant. Larvae range in color from yellow-green to black, heavily mottled with lighter spots and covered with short spines. Caterpillars conceal themselves with a tubular construction of leaves, in which they live, eating away at the temporary shelter. Having eaten one refuge, the caterpillar moves on to create another. "The hanging chrysalis is brown or gray, faintly marked with black and ornamented with golden tubercles."



The Tvetens provide lots more information about the Red Admiral, as well as many other butterflies one encounters in the LRGV. I highly recommend any book by these authors.

For those who need an easily-carried butterfly ID for outdoor adventure, I recommend an easily-affordable series of brochures. The second title in the *Lower Rio Grande Valley Brochure Series* is *Butterflies*. Each brochure sells for \$2.00. They are available at local wildlife refuges and Valley Nature Center in Weslaco. Forty-eight butterflies are featured, with beautiful color images, and the brochure fits easily in a pocket.

LRGV butterfly photography can be seen at <<http://community.webshots.com/user/gquin>>, the work of Gil Quintanilla of Mission. Gil is a volunteer for the newly-created NABA Butterfly Park located in Mission. The red admiral photo on this page is an example of Gil's excellent work.



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