

Christina Mild
RIO DELTA WILD

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Perezia runcinata photographed at Green Island.



FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Perezia runcinata*
Common Names: Peonia, Devil's Shaving Brush
Family: Compositae (Sunflower)

Pink Perezia Edges Arroyo Brush

My first analysis of *Perezia runcinata* was "here's a pink dandelion!" Like a dandelion, this *Perezia* grows as a basal rosette of leaves. Pink flower heads lack the usual long stems of a dandelion, though the compact flower head is similar and the seeds have that familiar, fluffy umbrella appearance.

The common name for this plant is Peonia, and the bloom color resembles that of the Peony which blooms in my relatives' yards in Illinois. That's about the extent of how the plants are similar.

This is a plant which is uncommonly encountered, and what has been written about it is limited.

It may not be the best idea to reveal that some of my closest friends are grave robbers, but, alas, it is so. Neglected graveyards, you see, are some of the best places to find neglected plants. And some of my most trusted friends visit such places to find desirable plants which, if protected and propagated, can be used in restoring native vegetation to nature parks and other places.

This is how I became familiar with *Perezia runcinata*, as friends told me of specimens they found in an old cemetery. Those were transplanted to Valley Nature Center in Weslaco, where they grow now, somewhat hidden, along a short trail leading to a cactus garden.

Perezia runcinata also grows along the sandy edges of arroyo brush at Arroyo Park in Harlingen. You may spot the dark-green rosette of foliage along a sidewalk edge near concrete benches. (This is one of several entry points to the Arroyo Colorado Hike & Bike Trail.)

RGV Master Naturalists helped to rescue specimens from another valley location, where plants were growing on a trail. Dick Roesler was critical to that rescue, as he's an accomplished digger. The fleshy root of *Perezia* enables survival in very dry conditions, and digging up that long

root is necessary for successful transplanting. The rescued specimens were planted in Ramsey Nature Park near a raptor roost (a large dead snag).

Perezia runcinata is included on TAMU's list of "Ornamental Plants for the Rio Grande Valley" as a wildflower. That list can be found on their website. TAMU's description of the foliage is apt: "a rosette of rough, dark green, thistle-like leaves."

Thanks to Bill Horton and Leroy Overstreet, I was allowed to photograph the plant on Green Island. Recent rain had led to a rapid growth spurt. In that image, you see beautiful new foliage amongst the less-attractive, darkly-colored older leaves.

Handling the plant is memorable, as the foliage is well-armed with spines and bristly hairs.

One page on the website of Native Plant Society of Texas (NPSOT) lists *Perezia runcinata* as a "deer-deterrent." Because the foliage is formidable, deer are thought to avoid eating it.

It is unlikely that you can purchase this plant, or even the seed. However, you may find it growing in out-of-the-way places, or on your own property. It's pretty enough that you may wish to protect it or to collect the seed for propagation. I recommend planting seed on the soil surface, as they are wind-distributed and quite small.

Several species of *Perezia* contain medically-useful substances. King's American Dispensatory (1898, by Harvey Wickes Felton, M.D., and John Uri Lloyd, Phr. M., Ph. D.) describes use of the rhizome of *Perezia adnata*. A root extract is an especially violent purgative and a laxative. The active compound is pipitzahoic acid, an oxyquinone. This compound has also been extracted from *Perezia wrightii* and *P. nana*, both found in Southwestern Texas.

The genus name *Perezia* is given to honor Lorenzo Perez, a 16th-century Spanish apothecary and author of a history of drugs.

The range and blooming period of *Perezia runcinata* is described by Correll & Johnston: "Frequent in brush on calcareous soil, Rio Grande Plains, less frequent in eastern parts of the Trans-Pecos and Edwards Plateau, blooming March thru November; Texas, Nuevo Leon and Coahuila, south to Hidalgo." (Manual of the Vascular Plants of Texas, 1979.)

Mike Heep offers these observations: "Pretty little plant. I see it along the arroyo, and in the woods along resacas. But also less commonly in that high, dry land like in Starr Co. A nice plant for a rock garden or in a bed with a mulch covering on the ground. Will bloom a lot if it has water and some fertilizer."

Heep continues: "*Perezia wrightii* is also around. I first found it near Port Harlingen. Could not figure out what it was until it flowered. It is an upright, multi-stemmed sub-shrub, not a rosette. The leaves do have a few teeth, but not as many as *P. runcinata*. The flower is the same pink, though."

Success of *Perezia runcinata* depends upon sunlight availability and competition from other plants. Several specimens I've "rescued" have been crowded out in flower beds by other plants which outgrew them.

The botanical name of the genus *Perezia* has been changed back to an older proposed name, *Acourtia*.

Under that name, you'll find an especially thorough account of those species found in Texas in "The Useful Wild Plants of Texas, Vol. 1." Scooter Cheatham, Marshall C. Johnston and Lynn Marshall continue work on this encyclopedic series. For more information, see <http://www.useful-wildplants.org>.

This is an excellent project deserving of public support. Cheatham and Lynn Marshall visited the local area this past week, photographing many of the plants which occur here and nowhere else in the state. The goal of this group is to thoroughly document the many possible uses of our widely-diverse native plant species.

As Scooter Cheatham so aptly explains: "plants don't have a whole lot of advocates working for them."

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.