

The patterned colors of Drummond's Phlox are striking.



FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Phlox drummondii*

Common Names: Drummond's Phlox

Family: Polemoniaceae (Phlox)

Phlox Drummondii Named Texas Ambassador

Howard S. Irwin compiled a Texas Wildflower book which has been, since 1961, a favorite on wildflower-lovers' bookshelves. His words regarding today's featured plant are worth repeating more than forty years later:

"There are few better botanical ambassadors from the state of Texas than the Annual Phloxes. A rather complex assemblage of hybrids developed in Europe has been for years marketed in the horticulture trade as *P. drummondii*, the principal parent species."

In 1834, Thomas Drummond, still honored today by the plant's scientific name, gathered their seeds near Gonzalez, TX and took them back to England for garden planting. The seeds he collected were from an area where red and pink-flowering plants converged.

Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center provides additional information about this original seed collection: "About 200 true breeding strains were developed from this single collection of seed, including red, pink, white, lavender, maroon, coral, pale pink, and the mixtures of these colors, with the central "eye" of the flower differing in color from the outer color of the petals."

One can see the result of planting these (and other wildflower) seeds immediately in front of Valley Morning Star's building in Harlingen. The beauty there is absolutely amazing.

In his book, Irwin continues: "The distinctions among the several presently recognized wild species are in most cases rather fine details of flower color and hairiness..."

Mike Heep echoed this thought, responding to my request for explanatory comments on identifying this knock-out beauty. "Phlox is OK once you quit worrying about the species name of any one that you are looking at. There is a great deal of intergrading of one into another. I enjoy looking at the color variants."

Because the leaves of Drummond's Phlox are eaten by white-tailed deer and bobwhite quail, it is included in "Broad-Leaved Herbaceous Plants of South Texas" by Everitt, Drawe and Lonard (1999). These authors provide quite a lot of data. The plant is an annual, growing from a taproot. There are five petals, united into a tube, with a dark purple, star-shaped entrance. Five stamens are included within the throat of the floral tube. These brightly-colored blooms are commonly found on sandy soils in openings and prairies in the Rio Grande Plains and Coastal Prairies.

Several authors point out that Drummond's Phlox is typically weak-stemmed, although the growth habit is quite variable, with some stems strongly ascending.

All varieties of the plant, despite otherwise great variability, are covered in long hairs which are glandular. Some plants are soft to the touch, while others are distinctly sticky.

A field of Phlox should be a great place for Lepidoptera-watching, as butterflies and moths are the pollinators. Their long tubular tongues are perfect for insertion into the long floral tube.

Phlox is a Greek word meaning “flame,” an apt description for the brilliant hue of these blooms. They appear bright even through dark, polarized sunglasses.

Dr. Richardson indicates that Rio Grande Phlox, subspecies *grandiflora*, occurs most frequently in sandy soils of Hidalgo and Willacy counties. (“Plants of the Rio Grande Delta,” 1995.)

Richardson includes Rio Grande Phlox (*Phlox glabriflora* subsp. *littoralis*) in “Wildflowers and Other Plants of Texas Beaches and Islands” (2002). With more narrow leaves than Drummond’s Phlox, this subspecies occurs on sand dunes of Padre and Mustang Islands.

Geyata Ajilvsgi has a knack for describing the beauty of plants. Her “Wildflowers of Texas” has been reprinted several times. It was published in a revised version in 2002, with 105 added species. The following is from her “Note:” about Drummond’s Phlox:

“Where proper soil conditions exist, Drummond’s phlox is usually common and readily self-sows. It is one of the plants usually found around old home sites. It is often planted along roadsides by the highway department, especially in the northeast and southeast regions. Some subspecies do not perform as well in cultivation, primarily because of their specific requirement for deep, sandy soil.”

If you wish to enjoy the wildflowers of spring, now is the time to do so.

The Annual Wildflower Field Trip sponsored by Arroyo Colorado Audubon Society is scheduled for Saturday, Mar. 20th. Those who would like to participate should meet in the Valley Morning Star’s front parking area at 9 a.m. Frank Gonzales, of Gonzales Integrated Farms, will be present to talk about the beautiful wildflowers blooming there. Gonzales is responsible for formulating the wildflower seed mix and planting. Thanks to the Valley Morning Star, we don’t have to travel far to admire this lovely scene. From that point, the group will travel northward to visit other wildflower-adorned roadsides.

Seed for *Phlox drummondii* is available from a variety of sources.

University of Florida Cooperative Extension Service provides this data: “...sweetly-scented blossoms make nice cut-flowers...Phlox will faithfully bloom from early summer until frost, especially if faded flowers are removed. Although flowering will decline during the hottest months of the summer, plants will flower again once the weather cools. Phlox should be planted in full sun on well-drained, rich soil and given plenty of moisture for best growth...Seed...will quickly germinate within ten days...Phlox should be planted during spring in cold climates and in the fall where winters are mild.”

Go forth, then, to admire, plant, or care for, your Phlox!

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