

Giant Swallowtail nectars on blossoming Clammyweed.



FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Polanisia dodecandra* ssp. *riograndensis*

Common Names: Clammyweed, Cat Whiskers

Family: Capparidaceae (Caper)

Blooming Near the Bordas Escarpment

As my choice of Mother's Days activities, our family headed for the not-so-distant rocky hills of the LRGV's western regions. Bill MacWhorter of Weslaco was our guide to the natural and human history of the region. While we were smashing mosquitoes and gnats on sweaty arms and faces, Harlingen was deluged by a day-long rain.

Despite the heat, humidity and insects, we found those western rocky hills beautiful to explore, with many plants not found further to the east.

Clammyweed blooms reddened those rocky roadside edges near Rio Grande City. Giant Swallowtail butterflies were nectaring on the delicate reddish flowers. Though these butterflies are regarded as pests by citrus farmers, they're a beautiful sight to behold.

Many shrubs among the local brush are larval food plants for various species of Swallowtails. These are chiefly plants in the citrus family, like Colima (Lime Prickly Ash) and the Torchwoods.

One of our goals on this adventure to the western "valley" was to find another of these citrus shrubs, the beautiful Barreta. It occurs in the U.S. only in the western region of the LRGV.

Citrus shrubs were abundant where we explored, and so were the Swallowtails.

Swallowtails will lay their eggs on cultivated citrus crops if native citrus is absent. The larvae are cleverly disguised in the appearance of bird droppings. The large, voracious caterpillars are called “orange dogs.” When disturbed, they extend a red, forked osmeterium from behind the head, releasing a pungent odor. Mike Heep says they give the unsuspecting person a real fright.

During our visit, the butterflies sought *Polanisia* for nectar. *Polanisia* also serves as larval host for several less-flashy butterflies, the Cabbage, Checkered and Great Southern White.

Several species of *Polanisia* grow in Texas. They're known as clammyweed for a smelly odor and sticky surface. The seedpods of these plants are long and thin. They split open to release large numbers of seed.

Mike Heep notes that Clammyweed grows as a volunteer at Edinburg's Hidalgo County Historical Museum. The museum grounds are currently being replanted with native species following recent expansion and renovation.

In Arizona, Gambel and Scaled Quail consume the seeds of a related *Polanisia* species.

A close relative of similar appearance which grows in the LRGV is *Cleome gynandra*, the spider flower, typically with white-petaled flowers. Ring-Necked Pheasant, Mourning Dove and various small rodents are known to eat those seeds.

Having white flowers rather than reddish ones, *Cleome gynandra* is often called Cat's Whiskers or Spider Flower. The “Australian New Crops Newsletter” (Issue No. 11, January 1999) recommends *Cleome gynandra* as a possible crop species. The plant grows as a weed in most tropical countries. Leaves, young shoots and even flowers are eaten in Africa, India and Thailand. The raw leaves are an especially rich source of nutrients, especially vitamins A and C, calcium and iron. In Asia, the plant is cultivated for seed oil. The plant is also known to have various medicinal, insecticidal and repellent characteristics.

Cleome gynandra and *Polanisia dodecandra* are members of the Caper Family. The spice capers are flower buds of *Capparis*, another genus of the Caper Family.

Most species in the Caper family produce mustard-oil glucosides and some produce alkaloids, thus caution is advised in consuming 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.

