

False Wild Peppers are consumed by Passerine birds.



FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Solanum triquetrum*

Common Names: False Wild Pepper, Texas Nightshade

Family: Solanaceae (Potato, Nightshade)

Texas Nightshade is Pollinated by Buzzing Bees

A number of interesting plants can be found on the entry "island" at Frontera Audubon in Weslaco. You will find many such islands here and there, surrounded by curbing and asphalt driveways. Few of them have the amazing assortment of plants one finds there, at 1101 S. Texas Blvd.

One of these is Texas Nightshade. An attractive plant, it is thornless and rather delicate. It will bloom year-round and is a perennial.

Hierba Mora is a folk name for this and several closely-related plants, most parts of which can be toxic if ingested by humans.

Tomatillo is another common name. The fruit resembles a small tomato. It would be dangerous to teach this name to a child, who might assume the tiny fruit could be eaten.

I've been dissatisfied with the list of common names I've found for this small plant, as they aren't sufficiently descriptive or unique. Because of this, they're hard to remember.

White Nightshade could refer to several related plants which have white blooms.

False Wild Pepper isn't bad as a common name, as the rounded berries do resemble a small pepper.

All in all, I'd like to find a better common name, as I've been unable to remember any of them. It seems strange that this plant would occur only in Texas and adjacent Mexico, but that appears to be the case. Perhaps Texas Nightshade is the most suitable common name, after all.

"Very widespread, but not a dominant type plant anywhere..." Mike Heep remarks. "I have seen it on Gatlin Island, off of Stover Point, at Laguna Atascosa. There it was growing in the strip of brush on the ridge of the island, only a few feet above the water level of the bay."

You'll find this vine-like plant growing on fences or intertwined with other plants. I often see it emerging through the tops of recently trimmed hedges.

The species name *triquetrum* refers to the three-angled leaf shape, translating to "with three concave faces." Leaves are glossy green and frequently eaten by javelina.

The species is highly variable regarding habit and leaf shape. It may appear to be a vine or a bush. Leaves often have three lobes; they may also have five.

The Solanaceae family includes such commercially-important plants as tobacco, petunia, tomato and chile. The name may come from the Latin *solatium*, soothing, comforting or quieting. Many plants in this family have narcotic properties. Compounds extracted from them have also been implicated in human fatalities, *spina bifida* and other types of birth defects.

The genus *Solanum* has between 1200-1700 species, including the potato and eggplant.

“*Solanum* flowers are an example of the “vibrator” or “buzz” pollination syndrome; the flowers lack nectar and the abundant pollen is used as a reward; pollinators (such as bumblebees) shake the anthers by vibrating their thoracic flight muscles at a certain frequency; this sets up a resonance in the anthers or the space they enclose and the otherwise inaccessible pollen is released from the terminal pores of the anthers and collected by the insect.” (Shinners & Mahler’s “Flora of North Central Texas,” 1999.)

It is likely that two butterfly species utilize Texas Nightshade as a host plant. The Creamy Stripe-Streak has upper wings with forward edges of black on a field of powder blue. The Obscure Bolla resembles a Scallopwing.

Because Texas Nightshade provides food to doves, butterflies and bumblebees, I’m pleased to find it growing here and there. It often grows unnoticed within established hedges.

In the interest of safety, I would avoid growing it in yards where preschoolers amble about tasting everything.

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