



Christina Mild
RIO DELTA WILD

“*Vigna luteola* tolerates salty soil of Arroyo Colorado’s banks.”

FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Vigna luteola*
Common Names: Hairypod Cowpea
Family: Fabaceae (Legume)

Cowpea Vine Graces Tropical Coastal Areas

As far north as New York along the eastern U.S. coast, one may find *Vigna luteola*. It is most noticeable when the attractive yellow blooms are abundant. Along the Arroyo Colorado’s banks, the vine is not in bloom in early March.

This wild Cowpea Vine is essentially a vine of wet coastal areas, occurring through much of the tropical world. A very wide distribution area includes coastal areas of Africa, Central America, West Indies, southern United States and northern Australia.

Dr. Al Richardson includes the plant in “Wildflowers and Other Plants of Texas Beaches and Islands” (2002) Dr. Richardson’s concise description of the plant is very helpful in making a positive identification. He includes these (and other) details: twining vines with stems six feet or longer, alternate, compound leaves with three leaflets.

Richardson notes the blooming season as all year and reports the plant occurring in sandy soils on Padre and Galveston Islands.

Vigna luteola grows in a wide variety of soil types and is one of few legumes which tolerate saline conditions. In the Arroyo Colorado and the Rio Grande, salinity continues to increase with increased irrigation, agriculture and urbanization. Thus, salt-tolerance is a requirement for vegetation which occurs there.

Another important attribute exhibited by this plant is the ability to grow and form nitrogen-fixing root nodules in wet conditions.

Mike Heep points out that the black eyed pea, or cow pea, is closely related, being of the same genus, but a different species: *Vigna unguiculata*.

Because *Vigna luteola* has the nitrogen-fixing capabilities of a legume as well as tolerance for salt and various soil conditions, it is used around the world in many agricultural applications. It was tested as a groundcover for Macadamia orchards.

Twenty-three different scientific names have been given to this wild cowpea vine, probably because it has such a wide distribution and was “discovered anew” by excited researchers on repeated occasions. There are many common names, as well. My favorite is the common name employed in Australia, Dalrymple vigna.

Vigna luteola is reported as a short-lived perennial. Plants are self-fertile. No records of toxicity were found.

Agricultural reports on the web indicate that Wild Cowpea is attacked readily by leaf-eating caterpillars. To the butterfly-gardener, this indicates a potential for butterfly activity. In this area, the Mercurial Skipper and Long-tailed Skipper utilize species of *Vigna* as a larval host plant.

The Long-Tailed Skipper photo which accompanies this article is included on a CD of butterfly images

created by Dave Hanson. Over 400 butterfly images are included on the newest version of this



CD. To obtain information about the CD, you may contact Hanson by e-mail at:

K9ZVZ@Juno.com. The CD is also available at some local refuges, the Wild Bird Center store in Harlingen, and Valley Nature Center in Weslaco.

Wild Cowpea is a featured plant in a new publication, "Native Pond and Wetland Plants." Published by the Native Plant Project (NPP) of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, this color handbook is fourth in a series. It is designed to help anyone who wishes to utilize native plants in wet areas, along arroyo or Resaca banks, ponds and other water features.

Seed collection from *Vigna luteola* is a bit difficult. Developing seedpods are largely obscured by other structures and they split open, scattering seed, when ripe.

This may explain why I haven't found any old pictures of the seedpods in my vast, unwieldy photo collection, despite the occurrence of this pretty plant on my very own arroyo bank. It is a bit problematic poking about down there, through a jungle of growth and memories of alligator sightings.

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.

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