

Christina Mild
RIO DELTA WILD



“Threeawn glows in reflected sunset along a sun-baked curb.”

FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Aristida*

Common Names: Threeawn

Family: Gramineae (Grass)

Red Ants Associate with Threeawn

Threeawn is beautiful on the hottest, desert-dry days of the year, especially at sunset in a slight breeze.

It can be a painful plant for close study, however, as big red ants are almost always found in association with it.

Mike Heep warned me about these ever-present ants when I talked about transplanting the grass into my yard. My favorite colony of it grew on a vacant lot adorned with “For Sale” signs. Other lots nearby were rapidly being bulldozed and covered with concrete, asphalt and carpet grass.

Anyone can outsmart ants during cold weather, when their metabolism shuts down. Unfortunately, they wake right up with the slightest bit of heat. They’re also quite clever at climbing, unnoticed, way up inside a pant-leg or shirt-sleeve before biting. These things I learned from experience, though Heep tried his best to provide less painful enlightenment.

There are several species of Threeawn. Dr. Robert Lonard distinguishes six species in *Guide to Grasses of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas*, 1993. Lonard is an authority on local grasses and his book is the best in terms of specificity for this area.

It is a very difficult thing, identifying grasses. A dissecting microscope and good blooming and fruiting specimens are needed to identify a particular species. Manipulating tiny pieces of grass requires a good bit of skill. The slightest sigh can blow an entire specimen away. Then there’s the vocabulary of grass parts. In Lonard’s first paragraph on the genus *Aristida*, there are about fifteen words I need to look up.

Further compounding the complexities of grass identification, they tend to hybridize easily, showing various characteristics of different species.

The three awns which give this grass a common name are long and narrow. They catch both wind and sunlight, making the delicately-bladed short, clumped grasses most attractive in reflected sunlight and a gentle breeze. Their glow at sunset is wondrous.

Threeawn is quite often found in the driest, hard-baked earth where other plants lack required moisture and nutrients for survival. Colonies of the grass provide beautiful contrast

along the baked edge of a concrete curb, where most plants would be horribly wilted or unattractively covered with collected road grime.

Heep recounts learning to recognize Threeawn and other forage plants as a 9th-grade Harlingen High School FFA member. He, Gary Baczewski, and two other 9th-graders were selected by their Agriculture teacher for an annual competition sponsored by the U. S. Soil Conservation Service. “We won 4th place in 9th grade,” says Heep. “We beat the Valley as seniors, when Gary won the pocket knife for highest individual score.”

Hopefully, this competition continues, as grasses are among the most important plant species in preventing soil erosion and providing food for animals. Heep remembers just what the contest entailed. “We had to name the plant, and fill out a checklist whether it was: grass or legume, native or introduced, warm or cool season (all grasses are warm season), good, fair or poor grazer and annual or perennial.”

Few of our native grasses remain in abundance. Recognizing and protecting them from extinction is important. Many of us would be excited to grow tufted small grasses amongst the other native plants within a wildscaped garden. Especially exciting is the prospect of growing small clump grasses (which never need mowing) beneath the heavy shade of live oak and ebony.

Chris Best, plant ecologist based at Santa Ana, has created several demonstration plots of locally-native grasses. These plots remain the best place available to the general public for viewing native grasses as living specimen plants. Best delivers an excellent talk on the subject, accompanied by good photographs and living specimens.

At Valley Nature Center, Parks Committee Chairman Ken King and Director Martin Hagne have reintroduced native grasses amongst the other native plant species within the park. Their diverse color, texture, size and form add to the visual beauty of the park. Many birds enjoy the diversity of seed those grasses provide and some birds utilize grass blades in nest-building.

The association of red ants with Threeawn is no doubt an important one. Whether that association has been formally studied I cannot say. It is almost as difficult to identify ants with certainty as it is to identify grasses. Texas has a helpful expert for questions about insects, Mike Quinn, Invertebrate Biologist for Texas Parks and Wildlife. Mike identifies digital photos of insects on a frequent basis, and he can be easily contacted by e-mail:

Mike.Quinn@tpwd.state.tx.us.

Do Horny Toads also frequent Threeawn colonies, in search of mouth-watering ants? That would, at least, seem a possibility. We know for a fact that Horny Toad populations have dwindled, reason enough to protect or re-create the sort of area they might find habitable.

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. Website: www.riodeltawild.com.