



Christina Mild
Rio Delta Wild

FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Bastardia viscosa*
Common Names: Bastardia
Family: Malvaceae (Mallow)

Mexican Bastardia Attracts Desirable Wildlife

Bastardia viscosa has come along beautifully at Ramsey Park, as undergrowth of a mesquite-dominated area near the highway. Years of pulling out guinea grass in that area have finally paid off. The light green leaves of this waist-high

mallow reflect filtered sunlight and are pleasant to the human eye.

I believe I helped to propagate *Bastardia* in this area with seed collected at Valley Nature Center in Weslaco. Quite likely I spread many kinds of seed there and *Bastardia* was the most successful. I may have also dug small seedlings and transplanted them in rainy seasons, to fill in barren spots. In any case, I can recommend *Bastardia viscosa* as an easily-established and visually-pleasant replacement for invasive grasses in mesquite-dominated terrain.

In contrast to the choking nature of Guinea Grass, *Bastardia* allows the growth of many other plant species, so diversity replaces monoculture.

The Useful Wild Plants of Texas, Vol. 2 (Cheatham and Johnston, 2000) includes 2 pages of information on the plant and is the basis for this article. "*Bastardia viscosa* is native from South America north to the West Indies and to thickets in the subtropical brush of the southern parts of the Rio Grande Plains, Texas." A color-coded range map indicates that it occurs in Texas along the thin band widely-known as the "Lower Rio Grande Valley."

Bastardia viscosa is similar in appearance to several species of *Abutilon* and *Sida*. Characteristics which help to distinguish it include: 1) a flattened, beakless 5-part seed chamber, opening to reveal one seed in each, 2) foliage with an unpleasant smell when rubbed, and 3) upper stems which stick to fingers when rubbed, "*viscosa*."

Bastardia honors the French botanist, Toussaint Bastard.

Authors Cheatham and Johnston did taste testing on the blooms of Mexican Bastardia, finding them to be "very mild with a delicate sweetness, and delicious as a nibble, an addition to a salad, or as a delicate flavoring for other dishes." My opinion is that one should leave them for butterflies, which have no access to Super K-Mart, Wal-Mart or HEB.

Medicinal uses for the plant have been reported, but I find no documentation that treatment is effective. I've been lifted from mental dullness upon noticing the beauty of the plant and winged visitors it attracts. So I have no qualms about recommending it for improvement in one's "mental state."

Mike Heep recommends the plant as a host for desirable insects and butterflies. He recommends it not as an understory plant, but along edges and in openings. Indeed, the "understory" I mention earlier

is open to the highway on the west and flanked by a wide trail on the east. This could account for the adequacy of sunlight in what I earlier identified as “understory.”

Cheatham & Johnston advise that *Bastardia viscosa* is one of several hosts of the *begomovirus*, a golden mosaic plant virus transmitted by the same whitefly which infects cotton, sweet potato and tobacco. It would be wise to destroy any part of the plant which exhibits a bright yellow mosaic and curling and stunting of the leaves.

The distribution of Mexican *Bastardia* in Texas leads me to a parallel topic, that of plant populations in the Lower Rio Grande Valley.



Many are familiar with the region of the Tamaulipan Biotic

Province which lies in Texas. It extends north to the Edwards Plateau, roughly to San Antonio. Indeed, many maps showing “growing regions” lump the Rio Grande Valley into that large area, often denoting it as “Region 6. South Texas Plains.” Many of the same plant species occur throughout that entire area.

Various attempts have been made to distinguish the Southeastern-most counties from that larger area, as there are a number of plants which naturally occur there, and nowhere else, in the state.

Here are some descriptions which attempt to convey the special nature of this area in which we live. They appear on various web pages which appear to plagiarize each other. The original source of this material is probably: Blair, W. F. 1950. The biotic provinces of Texas, *Texas J. Sci.* 2:93-117.

The Lower Rio Grande Valley is located in the Matamoran district of the Tamaulipan Biotic Province. It is the northern boundary of much of the semitropical biota of Mexico.

The Rio Grande area is an overlap point of western desert, northern and tropical plants. This results in a unique and varied population of flora and fauna.



Climate of the Tamaulipan Province is semi-arid and *mega-thermal*, which means there is a marked deficiency of moisture for plant growth and that some plant growth continues throughout the year. This is the only area of mega-thermal climate in Texas and only one of three in the United States.

I find the “Matamoran District” concept helpful in signifying the exceptional vegetative diversity found here. It succinctly implies that the plant species unique to this area have wider ranges extending north from Mexico across the Rio Grande to the Rio Grande Delta area, widely-known as the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Historic flooding carried seeds of many plant species into this area from Mexico, especially before dams were constructed.

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