



Christina Mild
RIO DELTA WILD

FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name:

Cardiospermum halicacabum

Common Names: Farolitos, Balloon
Vine, Heartseed Vine

Family: Sapindaceae (Soapberry)

Balloon Vine Feeds Hairstreak Caterpillars

Balloon Vine is recommended for
landscaping in the Lower Rio Grande Valley

by the Native Plant Project. It is also listed on several websites as an invasive species or noxious pest.

This contradiction is worthy of explanation. Many plants, transplanted away from native habitat, proliferate wildly, especially in places like plowed fields, with fertilizer, irrigation and lack of competition from other plants. In their native habitat, growth was likely kept in check by a combination of environmental factors, including animal species which became adapted over centuries or eons to using them as food.

Thus the Common Balloon Vine, *Cardiospermum halicacabum*, may well be a noxious pest in many places. It has been introduced by the nursery trade into much of the U.S.

Locally, it is an attractive addition to landscapes and has an important role in local revegetation projects. Mike Heep points out that “In the Arroyo brush it is almost always found in short brush where it gets plenty of sun. After rains, it looks beautiful out there.”

Both the scientific and common names of this plant are based on morphology (observable characteristics of growth form). The seed-bearing structure is a hollow capsule, reminiscent of a balloon or lantern (*farolito*). Inside are small hard black seeds. These are adorned by a white heart-shaped “hilum” scar at the point of attachment to the enclosing capsule. Thus the name *Cardiospermum*, heart-seed.

The website of the Native Plant Project (www.native-plantproject.org) is an excellent resource about native plants, especially those which have been tested for landscaping use.

Teachers, and local libraries, still lack sufficient copies of printed material about local flora and fauna. This website offers great potential for creating connections between our future citizenry and their environment.



In the printed handbooks published by the Native Plant Project, Balloon Vine is featured on pg. 33 of *Cacti, Ground Covers and Vines*. The information provided for each plant in this series of three handbooks is succinct, well-organized and easily understood. Included is the data most of us want to know and have difficulty to find: where to plant, when blooming will occur, wildlife utilization and landscaping tips.

Frontera Audubon in Weslaco has especially nice Common Balloon Vines, in front of and within yards of the Visitor’s Center. (www.FronteraAudubon.org, 956-968-3275) They grow on a wooden trellis shading a wall and adorn an iron fence. Frontera’s director, Selena King, was kind enough to provide

photos of several butterflies which frequent those vines. Some, like the colorful Pixie, visit to nectar on blossoms which may be present throughout the year.

Other butterfly species lay eggs on this vine, providing appropriate food for the hatching larvae. Balloon Vine is a member of the Soapberry Family, whose members typically contain toxic saponins. You may be familiar with the reliance of Monarchs and Queens on the poison imparted to them because their larvae consume plants of the Milkweed family. His story repeats itself with other butterfly families, who have adopted a wide range of plant families with different toxic compounds as hostplants.

The Soapberry family contains cyanogenic compounds poisonous to humans and livestock. This no doubt contributes to Common Balloon Vine's reputation as an "agricultural pest." The website of the U.S. Geological Survey tells us that the 14 species of *Cardiospermum* contain cyanolipids and an unknown glycoside.

An excellent article in the Summer 2003 edition of *American Butterflies* explores the hostplant relationships of several butterflies and various Balloon Vine species found in Florida. Recent eradication efforts in Florida removed massive quantities of balloon vine, native to the area but misidentified as "invasive non-native." In Florida, according to Roger L. Hammer, Balloon Vines are "the major foodplant for the endangered Miami Blues" and "are the sole caterpillar foodplant for Silver-banded Hairstreaks."

Cardiospermum halicacabum is native to the LRGV and throughout the eastern half of Texas. It is widespread in warmer regions of the Western Hemisphere. Dr. Al Richardson gives good descriptions of two similar species of Balloon Vine found in this area. (*Plants of the Rio Grande Delta*, pgs. 146-147, 1995)

Mike Quinn's list of *Caterpillar Food Plants for the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas* lists several butterflies which rely upon *Cardiospermum* as a hostplant. Silver-banded Hairstreak and Red-lined Scrub-Hairstreak are small and delicately-patterned. The markings of Hairstreak butterflies include eye-like spots on the lower wing-tips. This subterfuge is heightened by tiny projections resembling antennae. It is often difficult at first glance to locate the head of these beautiful creatures, an obvious advantage for escaping predation.

Also listed by Quinn as reliant upon *Cardiospermum* is the Common Banner, whose appearance will strike you as anything but common. The butterfly is encountered but rarely in the Valley, usually in October. A Halloween appearance is especially appropriate, as this beauty is adorned with spectacular vertical bands of orange alternating with black.

The Kaufman Focus Guide series, advertised as "The Best Guides for Getting Started," live up to their claim rather well. Jim Brock and Kenn Kaufman have collaborated to author *Butterflies of North America*, which is fast becoming one of my favorite reference books. Photos of the butterflies mentioned above can be found in this volume.

"Plant them and they will come," is commonly spoken by those who select plants with the needs of wildlife in mind. If you choose to join in this endeavor, get ready for a daily parade of living miracles.

Technical assistance by Mike Heep, native plant nurseryman, UTPA Instructor.

Mrs. Mild holds a Masters degree in Biological Sciences. She may be contacted at RioDeltaWild@aol.com. Website: www.riodeltawild.com.

