



#### FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name:

*Heliotropium angiospermum*

Common Names:

Turnsole, Scorpion Tail, Alacrancillo

Family: Boraginaceae (Forget Me Not)

#### **Excellent Butterfly Plant Self-Propagates Readily**

The trails at Ramsey Park were lined by blooming Heliotrope in November, a beautiful result of ample rain. The delicate coiled spikes of small white flowers attracted myriad butterflies of many species, even through December.

Photographers and butterfly “listers” were well-pleased. Dave Hansen and Gil

Quintanilla recorded over 40 butterfly

species attracted to the blooms of this one species of wildflower.

Heliotrope wasn’t planted at Ramsey Park, though many plants of diverse species have been planted there in revegetation projects.

Heliotrope is a wildflower which pops up where it pleases. Dr. Richardson describes the usual habitat as “Open to dense scrub, disturbed weedy places.” He also delineates the blooming time: “All seasons.” (*Plants of the Rio Grande Delta*, 1995.)

Does Heliotrope require the presence of “weeds?” Probably not. This pattern of distribution indicates that Heliotrope still exists in the few areas where “weeds” are allowed to grow. It’s unlikely that Heliotrope would withstand the rigors of frequent mowing or the competitive pressure of a grassy lawn. Thus, the only available growing areas are generally described by humans as “weedy.”

Such weedy places are my favorites.

The Heliotrope population at Ramsey Park has waxed and waned over the years depending on rainfall and guinea grass control. When humans have intervened to eliminate taller invasive grass, the trailside has responded beautifully with an abundance of wildflowers, Heliotrope among them.

This plant has been studied by botanists since the late 1700’s and has received a dozen different scientific names. Those names were bestowed by different botanists, cataloguing the flora of different geographic areas. A different name was bestowed in almost every place the plant was collected. Other than this plethora of names, little written information about the plant can be found.

*Heliotropium angiospermum* is found in a relatively small portion of Texas: Cameron, Hidalgo and Willacy counties. Dr. Richardson’s book is one of few which contain a photo of it.

Despite the frequency of the plant in South Texas, *Digital Flora of Texas* website illustrates the plant with a photo taken in Montego-Bay/Brown's-Town; Jamaica (27-Dec-1987). In contrast, the plant is illustrated on Florida’s native plant websites with photos taken in Florida.

The distribution of this pretty wildflower extends from Bolivia and northern Chile northward through Central America and the West Indies to Florida and south Texas. It is a plant of uplands, rather than the wetter areas of highly-saline coast.

Arid extremes are tolerated, perhaps even preferred, by this delicate-appearing plant. The place where this Heliotrope is most noticeable at Ramsey Park is the heated interface between caliche loop and adjacent soil.

Humans must watch carefully for emerging wildflowers on the edge of trails and roads to avoid trampling them.

I've tried to rescue Heliotrope from areas to be bulldozed, though I've failed miserably at measuring success or failure. Ken King told Martin Hagne (Valley Nature Center's director) that it was impossible to transplant from the wild. Somehow Martin manages to do the impossible, time after time. His salvaged specimens of Heliotrope became quite vigorous. Mike Heep reports some transplanting success, as well.

Despite these gentlemen's ability to transplant rescued specimens with success, I recommend vigilance for where the plant naturally occurs and careful preservation of it.

It's much easier to mow "weeds" than to select and remove invasive grasses. Mowing or weed-eating is thus the usual grounds-keeping method of choice. The quick and easy method in this case eliminates wildflowers, as invasive grasses persist after mowing and many wildflowers do not. Preserving one wildflower usually leads to the preservation of many desirable species, as different wildflowers appear and bloom under different environmental conditions of heat, moisture, and amount and duration of sunlight.

Dr. Richardson lists six species of Heliotrope as occurring in this area. A fleshy, succulent species with similar flower spikes, *Heliotropium curassavicum*, is known as Seaside Heliotrope. It is not confined in distribution to the seaside, but will grow in desiccated or high-salt soils where many other species cannot exist.

Crowded and Narrow-Leaf Heliotrope are quite different in appearance, lacking the "scorpioid cymes" of flowers on a coiled spike. These two are illustrated in *Trees, Shrubs & Cacti of South Texas*, by James H. Everitt & D. Lynn Drawe, 1993 edition.

Some species of Heliotrope are used in medicinal teas. Cases of toxicity from the teas have been documented. Pyrrolizidine alkaloids are known to occur in some species of Heliotrope. These can cause severe liver damage.

*Alacrancillo* is a beautiful name for *Heliotropium angiospermum*.

It is one of the best nectar-providing wildflowers for the LRGV, especially in late fall and early winter.

In the dry and windy weeks of mid- to late December, some specimens show distinctive blackening on lower leaves. This is typical of the plant and unattractive in the eyes of many. If the plant has already dropped dried, blackened fruit, it will re-propagate when conditions permit.

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

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