



Christina Mild
RIO DELTA WILD

FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Rivina humilis*

Common Names:
Pigeonberry, Coralito, Rouge Plant,
Bloodberry

Family: Phytolaccaceae, Pokeberry

**Coralito Drips with Scarlet Berries
Almost Year-Round**

Pigeonberry was the first native plant I actually bought. The wild brush on our arroyo bank had many kinds of native shrubs and several trees, but Pigeonberry had not survived the invasion of guinea grass.

In this area, the presence of Pigeonberry in wild places indicates some revegetation success or nicely-undisturbed brush.

The distribution of the plant is wide, it is found throughout Tropical America, and is now widely naturalized in Indo-Malesia and the Pacific. In Texas, it is found in central, south and western parts, less frequently in easternmost parts of the state.

Many years ago, around the time of RGV Birding Festival, Liz Bennett wrote about Pigeonberry in the Valley Morning Star. Thus, I set about finding a plant for the section of our garden dedicated to perennials.

If one were to select just one native species as a “must have” for every yard, park, church and schoolyard in the LRGV, Pigeonberry might well be that choice.

The fruits are eaten by Rio Grande turkeys, chachalacas, mourning doves, white-winged doves and numerous species of passerine birds. The leaves are consumed by javelinas. Goodson’s Greenstreak butterflies lay their eggs on Pigeonberry leaves and their larvae then consume them.

For those who are patient and thrifty, there is little need to buy more than one Pigeonberry plant. Over the years since my first was planted, Pigeonberry has multiplied throughout the back yard and down the arroyo’s bank, greatly increasing visits by Chachalaca. Watching the young birds hop up to pick berries is one of my fondest memories.

Claire Heep says chachalacas eat the berries in the Heep’s front yard, where they have planted them close to the house. She enjoys a close-up view through her windows.

One can easily aid the spread of Pigeonberry to new places by digging it in the rainy season, moving it to places where it has not spread.

The natural spreading of Pigeonberry plants throughout the back yard has nurtured strength and endurance on my part. I’m the only person available to carefully avoid mowing down young plants and to yank out the carpet grass which threatens them. (Exciting animals have never shown up in my yard to eat carpet grass!)

Thus, mowing has become my task, even though my dad believes he could do a better job whenever he visits. I haven't forgotten all the times he's mown down my mother's prized flowers. I doubt that he would take notice of Pigeonberry.

Selena King, Director of Weslaco's Frontera Audubon, told me some years back that she eats the small red berries while she works. There are few people who can out-work Selena King. So I took up eating them, hoping for improved productivity. Besides that, they're a tasty, if tiny, nibble.

If you search on "Pigeonberry," you'll find references stating that the berries are toxic. Reading more carefully, you'll note that these are usually references to a different plant, not found in the LRGV, also known by the common name "Pigeonberry."

On the other hand, *Flora of North Central Texas*, (Shiner & Mahler, 1999) states that the leaves and roots are poisonous "and the fruits have been implicated in non-fatal poisonings." These are researchers who I tend to believe. Perhaps Selena and I have been poisoned, and haven't taken notice of it. If you eat Pigeonberries, you must assume a bit of risk.

Pigeonberry has no thorns and it isn't overly attractive to bees. The spikes of white or pinkish flowers and drooping spikes of red berries are very festive. As cut ornamentation, Pigeonberry is disappointing and messy, as most of the berries drop before you return indoors.

There are two widespread varieties of Pigeonberry which are distinguishable and Correll & Johnston note these. (Manual of the Vascular Plants of Texas, 1979.)

At Sabal Palm Grove, you'll find rather large berries of opaque orange-red coloration. More common in the wild and for sale is the Pigeonberry which bears transparent red fruit. One of these has flowers of a pinkish tint, while the other's blooms are white.

After eating both types of berries over the years, I believe the opaque ones are inflated with tiny air bubbles. They're a bit like eating a tiny sponge. The transparent red ones are more satisfying as a fruit. My recipe for both varieties is the same: eat them raw and spit the seeds where you'd like to have additional plants.

Christine Jordan, no longer living in the valley, discovered a yellow-fruited Pigeonberry which she provided for Valley Nature Center in Weslaco. Those plants are growing somewhere in the Nature Park. I always need help in finding them.

Humilis means low. This is a plant which will not become a shrub, growing just about to the height of your knee. In one location, however, one of my plants is probably as tall as I am.

A Texas A&M website provides these details: evergreen, salt-tolerant perennial. High heat tolerance, medium water requirements, requires partial shade and tolerates full shade. Width is about three feet.

Native American Seeds, responsible for saving many of Texas' wildflowers and grasses, sells Pigeonberry seed on the internet at www.seedsource.com. This is what they have to say about the plant: "Pigeonberry is a great choice for a ground cover in dappled to part shade. It's one of those plants that has to be experienced to be believed. Its bloom time is actually whenever the weather is above freezing. After it gets started, Pigeonberry will have pink and white blooms and red

berries all at the same time. The berries don't last long, though, because they are a real favorite with the birds.”

For more rapid results, like festive red berries and delicate blooms for winter holidays, I recommend buying from plants of our excellent local sources. Good sources of native plants exist locally. Wild Bird Center is reopening in downtown Harlingen at 122 E. Jackson, selling native plants grown by Mike & Claire Heep and providing excellent information about choosing and planting them. Valley Nature Center in Weslaco has an enormous assortment of valley natives and mature labeled specimens scattered around the nature park. In McAllen, Valley Garden Center's Nick Hoelscher has a section specifically dedicated to native plants. If you need help, be sure to ask for him.

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

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