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RIO DELTA WILD

“Silver Leaf Nightshade thrives in the poorest soils.”

FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Solanum eleagnifolium*

Common Names: Trompillo, Silverleaf Nightshade

Family: Solanaceae (Tomato, Potato)

This Beauty Indicates Poor Soil

Why write about a least favorite plant? Well, people often ask about this one. It grows in many places and it can be quite a threat.

Silver Leaf Nightshade has a pretty flower, to be sure. It is found in many of the United States and many countries of the world. It may be native here, but is a hard plant to praise.

A good use for this prickly plant is as an indicator of pitiful soil, a plant of disturbed areas. To the potential land buyer, this silvery wildflower is a red flag that few other plant species will grow on the land in present condition.

In all fairness, it must be said that some animals eat the rounded yellow fruits which blacken with maturity. “The fruits are eaten by white-tailed deer, javelinas and feral pigs, and the seeds are eaten by bobwhite quail.” (Everitt, Drawe & Lonard, *Broad-Leaved Herbaceous Plants of South Texas*, 1999.)

The Washington State Noxious Weed Control Board website is an exemplary source of information about this plant:

“Silverleaf nightshade contains toxic alkaloids that combine with sugars to produce glycoalkaloids that irritate the gastrointestinal tract; within the tract, these compounds may be hydrolyzed to release alkalids or alkamines that are nerve toxins (Boyd et al. 1984). Cattle that consume 0.1% to 0.3% of their body weight in ripe berries display moderate poisoning symptoms, which may include: rapid, labored breathing; salivation and slobbering; nasal discharge; yellow discoloration of the skin in light-colored animals; weakness and lack of coordination; trembling of muscles in back legs; anemia; and increased heart rate (Buck et al. 1960). Sheep are more resistant to the toxins and goats are unaffected (Boyd et al. 1984).”

Nightshade fruits are currently used in the manufacture of steroidal hormones. Historically, Pima Indians added crushed fruits to milk in cheese-making. Kiowa Indians combined the seeds with brain tissue, used for tanning hides.

The plant family Solanaceae, to which Silverleaf Nightshade belongs, contributes exceedingly valuable food crops, including the potato



and tomato. Yet many humans suffer allergies to them: my daughter to tomatoes and a niece to potatoes. Some plant parts (the leaves and the sprouts of potatoes) are exceedingly toxic.

Suffice it to say that humans should not consume any part of *Trompillo* or other wild plants in the family Solanaceae. Toxic compounds are found in many members of this plant family.

Trompillo must be hailed as a survivor. Armed with a prickled stem, it's a painful weed to pull up. It's also perennial, so it won't die out as seasons change.

Those who toil to pull *Trompillo* by hand are rewarded by a new crop of plants popping from the ground. Creeping roots make the plants almost impossible to eradicate.

Small children should be well-supervised in the vicinity of *Trompillo*. Many children explore the world by tasting everything they encounter, my daughter being one prime example.

If this plant grows in your yard, it's time to add organic content. Mulching with leaves, grass clippings or woodchip mulch is a good start. Making a compost pile with yard and kitchen waste is another good idea. With the frequent showers we've received over the past few weeks, organic matter tends to decompose quickly, almost miraculously.

Trompillo is like a signpost where man has trampled badly on the earth. That damage is reversible with some thought and effort.

Speaking of damage, Wild Bird Center in Harlingen (offering a wide assortment of native plants) is temporarily closed due to roof damage. Owner Bob Stelzer says that customers may call his cell phone, 956-371-4355, to order plants and other supplies for pickup or delivery.

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

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