Christina Mild
RIO DELTA WILD

"*Stemodia schottii* occurs in seasonally-damp depressions."

FLORA FACTS
Scientific Name: *Stemodia schottii*
Common Names: none found
Family: Scrophulariaceae (Snapdragon)

Overlooked Jewels of a Soggy Bog

Much of what I believed to be Harlingen Thicket is now housing development. For several years, that Thicket and environs occupied most of my time and energy. I was auditing Dr. Al Richardson's "Plant Taxonomy" class and the Thicket was an unending source of plants to be studied, identified and added to a list. Some people list birds, some list butterflies or dragonflies. I list plants.

At a low area in full sun were many species unfamiliar to me, and not pictured in field guides. They were noticeable only when sufficient water had collected in the area. "Jewels," is the term Mike Heep employs for these often small plants. "They're generally overlooked," Heep notes.

Field guide photos typically illustrate the most common species or the most prevalent. Geyata Ajilvsgi elaborates in her newly-revised edition of *Wildflowers of Texas* (2002). "With over 5000 species of flowering plants listed for the state, choosing … wildflowers … was not easy … Basically, only the most common and the showiest herbaceous species were chosen…"

Many plants one may encounter locally have no published, identified photos. Quite often, botanists know them from dried and mounted specimens secured in a herbarium.

We are often surprised to find that our priorities vary widely from those of close friends. A talented botanist was mystified that I would concentrate rescue efforts on plants of an ephemeral nature. "Who cares about a plant which only shows up for a few weeks or months of the year," he remarked. In dry conditions, such specialized plants shrivel almost to nothing. A big difference between these and tender exotic annuals is that these native "jewels" will reappear year after year in the same location when conditions are suitable for growth.

Stemodia schottii is one such jewel. Being entirely uncommon, it has no common name. A close relative is Wooly Stemodia, but the two are quite different in appearance and growth form.

The need to rescue *Stemodia schottii* (and neighboring species just as unique and beautiful) became critical when a sign bearing "Carter St." appeared adjacent to the often-wet depression where they grew. I had no idea if the small plant was rare or common, only that I found it growing in few and far-between places.

It seems that most low, water-collecting places are quickly filled for community betterment. Thus such plants become less common each and every day.

Sue Griffin, Billy Joe Snider, Jr. and Mark Conway put brains and shovels to the task of creating a place where such plants might be protected. With other volunteers from Arroyo Colorado Audubon, they created an overflow area at one end of the drip pond in Ramsey Nature Park. "Here's a place to rescue those plants you're trying to save," they told me.

Diann Ballesteros and Suzanne Conway helped with the plant rescue effort, digging for transplant to various sites, including Diann's very own backyard pond.

I have finally been able to photograph this small plant, as it has survived and multiplied at the boggy end of Ramsey's drip pond. But I had quite forgotten the identity or whether I had even found a name for it.

"It's probably Scrophulariaceae," Heep advised, examining a photo attached to e-mail.

In that section of my worn and battered field guide, *Stemodia schottii* was circled, with a note above, "Coakley & 40 acres." The leaf description sounded close enough to be the right plant: "Leaves … to 2 cm long and .5 cm broad; margins toothed."

Texas Nature Conservancy's helpful botanist, Bill Carr, solved my dilemma. "Bill," I intoned via e-mail. "I think this might be *Stemodia schottii*. I can't find any photos, even with a web search. Do you recognize it?"

Bill had never seen the plant alive. He drove to UT Austin's Herbarium for a look thru mounted specimens. "You're right," he quickly replied.

Bill also found records that the plant has been recorded "from the four counties on the lowest stretch of the Rio Grande, i.e., Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr and Zapata, as well as up in Val Verde County." "Turner & Cowan (1993) cited specimens from two additional counties, Webb and La Salle. … South of the river, *Stemodia schottii* has been collected in the Mexican states of Coahuila, Durango, Nuevo Leon, Tamaulipas and Veracruz." Bill continued, citing references I have no easy access to.

Wow! How many people would go to such trouble to find an answer?

Probing thru a herbarium is hardly fun. They reek of mothballs; otherwise insects would devour the plants. Every specimen seems as fragile as ancient paper; little pieces fall off at the slightest touch. I am indeed grateful to Bill and to Texas Nature Conservancy for employing him at what he does so well.

So why should I be so wound up about a very small plant one might see only a few months of the year? Well, I see it as an overlooked masterpiece, created by The Great Master himself.

Do we cherish other things which are transient, like sunsets and meteor showers and comets? Of course. Do we guard, preserve and protect other things of beauty, like works of art, musical compositions, and written documents? Of course we do.

The fact that these small plants are ephemeral makes them all the more like jewels.

Why should I bother you with this concern? Well, *Stemodia schottii* may appear in the low spot in your yard, on your ranch, or you may see it when you take a walk. Perhaps you'll think better about grading that "low spot" and feature it as part of the natural landscape.

Perhaps someday you'll find yet another plant you haven't noticed in the past. Perhaps you'll photograph it. And perhaps you'll be the first person who successfully does so. We've a long way to go before we've photographed and identified every plant which grows here.

So what if you take a splendid photo of a common plant? It would probably look great hanging somewhere on a wall.

Technical assistance by Mike Heep, native plant nurseryman and UTPA Instructor. Mrs. Mild holds a Masters degree in Biological Sciences. She may be contacted at RioDeltaWild@aol.com. Website: www.riodeltawild.com.