



Christina Mild
RIO DELTA WILD

“Delicate growth of Rama del Sapo contrasts spiny strength of cactus and agave.”

FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Talinum paniculatum*

Common Names: Rama del Sapo, Flame Flower, Pink Baby's Breath

Family: Portulacaceae

Hot-Pink Jewels Rare Encounter In Thorny Brush

One rarely notices *Rama del Sapo* when other vegetation is lush. In very cold months, when vegetation is sparse, this rosette of succulent leaves may be noticeable and even showy.

In scorching months of extended summer, the phosphorescent pink glow of Flame Flower is a striking contrast to the barren thorniness of south Texas brush. Blooms are unlikely to be open when the sun is bearing down in full force, Ken King tells me. King is Parks Committee Chairman at Valley Nature Center and a

volunteer for Frontera Audubon, both in Weslaco. He explains further than opening a flower is a huge extravagance in terms of plant energy.

It is remarkable that this delicate plant survives our climatic extremes.

Talinum paniculatum is infrequently encountered. I first noticed it along edges and cleared areas of what is now Harlingen Thicket. It is one of the species I've been able to rescue from bulldozed areas adjacent to the Thicket. A tuberous root probably enables the fleshy leaves to re-grow quickly after injury.

One finds living specimens of the plant at Weslaco's Valley Nature Center in the Native Cactus Garden. In early spring, the plant appears as a rosette of succulent leaves. As hot, dry weather continues, one or more elongated vine-like stems extend for several feet from the basal rosette, weaving over and through taller shrubs and cacti. Tiny, brightly-colored, five-petal flowers open in late afternoon and remain open during evening. King is uncertain how *Talinum* reached the Valley Nature Center. “It grows all over the lomas,” he tells me. (Lomas are wind-deposited hills of vegetation which dot the coastal area.)

Mike Heep finds the plant in drier soils around the Brownsville area, “away from the resacas.”

Eight *Talinum* species occur in Texas, all are “Flame Flowers.”

Several websites use the common name Fame Flower, which may well have originated from a typo. A web search brings forth ample hits on this plant, but scant information.

Talinum paniculatum is widely-available from a number of plant nurseries, which promote growing it in a pot. Common names used in advertising include: *maria gorda* and Jewels of Opar.

The species has wide distribution upon the globe: Mexico, Central America, West Indies, South America, and has been introduced in China. In the U.S., the plant is native only to clay soils in thickets of extreme South Texas. (Correll & Johnston, *Manual of the Vascular Plants of Texas*, 1979.) Dr. Richardson notes the distribution as Cameron and Willacy counties. (Alfred Richardson, *Plants of the Rio Grande Delta*, 1995.)

As with any plant which occurs in only a few counties, lack of information and misinformation make our understanding of this plant incomplete.

The New York Botanical Garden, for example, contains many images of this species, all collected from remote places to the south of us. None of their specimens were collected from the LRGV.

The Global Compendium of Weeds lists the plant as “weed, naturalized, alien” in the U.S.



While one can successfully transplant and grow *Rama del Sapo*, it would be a real stretch to define growth in this climate as “weedy.” The plant manages to survive, but neither out-grows nor prevents the growth of nearby plants. Finding it among other plants requires some investigation.

Talinum paniculatum also grows at Ramsey Nature Park in Harlingen, transplanted adjacent to a bird bath. It’s at a very special spot, designed for enjoying nature in restful repose and dedicated to the memory of nature lover Betty McEnery

As summer draws to a close, we might ask ourselves if we’ve taken a child into wild places lately, to pass our love of wild things to a future generation.

As I reflect upon childhood experiences which planted such feelings in my heart, I find that those moments were actually few. Some walks with my grandmother, a seedling gift from a great uncle, and a short conversation with an actual “birder” are the ones I remember. Those few short moments led to the life-long burning to study what God creates without the help of and despite the destructive power of man.

Because I love to re-visit the protected area which surrounds South Padre Island’s boardwalks, I stopped there with a nephew on our way to the beach. It was all but impossible to draw him away from the birds, crabs, turtles, and schools of iridescent and translucent fish.

These days, children have little time to honor invitations from an adult.

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

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