



Christina Mild
RIO DELTA WILD

“Sicklewing Skipper nectars on Frostweed at Los Ebanos Preserve.”

FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Verbesina microptera*
Common Names: Frostweed, Capitana
Family: Asteraceae (Composite, Daisy)

Frostweed Attracts Many Butterflies

On Oct. 21st, I visited Los Ebanos Preserve,
near the Hwy. 100 exit off Rt. 77. The Medical

Alliance was hosting our State President, and the setting was perfect: sunny skies, with plenty of blooms and butterflies.

An article in the Nov. 2003 issue of *Texas Highways* features Los Ebanos Preserve, with an excellent and well-illustrated article by John & Gloria Tveten. As the Tveten's point out, Los Ebanos provides a nature experience for everyone. Shaded seating in a manicured setting might be just the speed for many visitors, patient enough to wait near the many bird feeders surrounded by tropical blooms. Butterfly photography in the native plant gardens and birdwatching on 82 wooded acres are enticing for more adventuresome souls. Thus, Los Ebanos Preserve has something for almost everyone.

Frostweed was blooming at various spots in the woods during my visit, as well as in the sunnier “butterfly gardens” just a short walk from the house. Black butterflies with curved wings were especially attracted to Frostweed during my visit. They were Sicklewing Skippers, belonging to a group of butterflies which fold their wings when perching.

Since Spring of 2002, when Los Ebanos Preserve first opened for public visits, the butterfly gardens have become a prime spot to visit. Dr. Tveten declares that there is “no better place to find the gorgeous Mexican Bluewings.” Smaller, but metallic-blue and less shy, many Blue Metalmarks displayed themselves for my visit. Their scales reflected so much sun that my photos of them are just a blue glow. I neglected to use a polarizing filter.

Frostweed is a perennial, found in many places in south Texas. The leaves are eaten by deer and cattle, thus the distribution and abundance of the plant are limited.

Mike Heep has this to say about it: “Frostweed always blooms right about now. It grows like crazy. Very vigorous. One plant showed up in front of the entrance to Bentsen Palm Village. There were butterflies nectaring on it. Instead of telling the workers to yank it out, we decided, what the heck, let's plant one on the other side of the entrance also.”

Frostweed is not the most orderly of plants. It sometimes curves in unusual growth patterns, seeking the best sunlight. As a magnet for butterflies, however, it is quite effective, and I find the white blooms to be a nice contrast in the flower garden.

Closely related is *Verbesina virginica*, the common Frostweed found in much of Texas and the Gulf States north to Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Missouri and Kansas. Since this species

intergrades with *Verbesina microptera* of the Rio Grande Plains and northeastern Mexico, the two species may someday be combined.

The name Frostweed applies most appropriately to the plant wherever freezes are common. The stems split open to expel a frothy sap that forms showy masses of ice crystals. I can't say that I've seen this phenomenon firsthand. We haven't suffered freezing temperatures since I discovered Frostweed growing in my yard. Frank Wiseman tells me that the name *Capitata* or *Capitana* probably refers to this frothy, crystalline covering.

In years past, leaves of Frostweed were dried and used as a tobacco substitute by Amerindians and Mexicans. The leaves are quite large for a plant native to this area.

Look for Frostweed growing on edges of thickets, palm groves and on open ground. Blooms are encountered throughout summer and fall.

A number of people have told me how well their tropical garden plants attract wildlife. What I see in my own yard, and at Los Ebanos Preserve, is quite to the contrary.

Last week, for example, there were at least two dozen butterflies nectaring on one of my larger mistflower plants, *Eupatorium odoratum*. At least six different butterfly species visited during the short time I watched. On a nearby row of Bougainvillea, resplendent with blooms and growing in full sun, a lone Swallowtail Butterfly was nectaring.

The tropical vines and Hibiscus at Los Ebanos Preserve are lovely to behold, with their glorious large and colorful blooms. But where were butterflies nectaring during my visit? In the butterfly gardens, just a few feet away, on smaller and less showy blooms, obviously full of nectar.

Recent rains have made this an excellent fall for planting. To decide which species you'd like to plant, you might visit one of the places where good butterfly nectar plants are labeled. There are too many good choices to list here, but I have links to local butterfly gardens on the website of Arroyo Colorado Audubon at www.kiskadee.org.

And don't forget about the 10th Annual RGV Birding Festival in Harlingen from Nov. 5th – 9th. An excellent selection of plants will be available for sale at the "Birder's Bazaar," with friendly experts to help with your decisions. See www.RGVBirdFest.com.

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

