



Christina Mild
RIO DELTA WILD

“Colima is propagated easily by broadcast seed.”

FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name:
Zanthoxylum fagara
 Common Names: Colima,
 Lime Prickly Ash
 Family: Rutaceae
 (Citrus)

**Colima, Evergreen
 Native Citrus, Requires
 Little Moisture**

Winter’s heavy

doldrums are upon us. During a typical year, excruciating lower-than-70-degree temperatures are with us for at least a week. Gazing at gray skies through leafless branches, one dreams of evergreens within the yard.

One may view delightful evergreen “Citrus family relatives” at Valley Nature Center in Weslaco, within an easily-accessed courtyard. Each has a unique scent, which Mike Heep attributes to different “terpenes,” or combinations of them. Members of this plant family (Rutaceae) are host plants for the Giant Swallowtail butterfly. (Valley Nature Center is located at 301 S. Border St. Phone 956-969-2475. Website: www.valleynaturecenter.org.)

Colima, Lime Prickly Ash, illustrated in this article by several photographs, creates a well-armed barrier hedge. The leaves make citrus tea.



Mountain Torchwood is thornless, with shiny leaves and beautiful upright branches. Texas Torchwood is shorter and survives the shade of Ebony. Hawkmoths nectar there. Barreta is a lovely thornless tree, with lustrous small leaves and dry seeds which never make a mess.

Esenbeckia, a rare relative, grows rather slowly. Small specimens grow along the Nature Center’s trails. Larger ones are peripheral to Santa Ana’s wondrous butterfly garden.

Hercules’ Club is a citrus relative only marginally-native to the LRGV. A nice specimen grows in the courtyard I just described. Tingle- and Tickle-Tongue are good names for it. A leaf in the mouth is reminiscent of menthol, mint and things requiring a prescription. It’s quite a rush.

One finds Hercules’ Club Prickly Ash, *Zanthoxylum hirsutum*, growing as a sporadic understory colony along the nature trails at the Falfurrias rest area on Hwy. 281. An innocuous snake drank at the water-hole when my family last enjoyed the trails. It’s a lovely place to relax and notice living things around you. In spring, the wildflowers there are not to be missed.

Dr. Richard Hoverson hasn’t found Hercules’ Club growing south of Brooks County, just east and west at the same latitude. He says *Z. hirsutum* has an affinity for sandy soils. It occurs where soil pH may be acidic as 4. The Nature Center’s plant is in sandy loam, with added asphalt and piñata remnants. Hoverson’s nursery specimen grows just fine in La Feria soil.

Hoverson has been waiting for his plant to seed out, but it never has. The shiny black seeds are similar to, but larger than, those of Colima He recalls popping a few of them into his mouth. A

companion who grew up around the plant raised his eyebrows just a bit. “They’re excruciatingly hot and it lasted for hours!” Hoverson admits.

“Pepperbark” is a common name for the plant. According to Standley (*Trees and Shrubs of Mexico*, 1920-26) the “...dried bark...is official in the U. S. Pharmacopoeia.” It contains one or more alkaloids. The leaves and bark have been used in the treatment of assorted ailments.

Deer eat the leaves, Hoverson tells me. They must have exciting breath for awhile. Perhaps this activity occurs more frequently during mating season.

The “odd pinnately-compound” leaves are ones you’ll remember once you’ve seen them. The pedicels and rachis (little stemlets) are red. The lustrous dark-green leaves are dotted with glands, especially along noticeably crinkled leaf margins. Strong thorns (contributory to the “Hercules’ Club” image) are like rose thorns, decurved from a solid base.

Searching for this plant on the “web” reveals an interesting website: www.springholler.net/plants.asp. Here, the folks at Spring Holler Ranch share pictures and a plant list. They’re revegetating their ranch for the needs of wildlife, and list the plants naturally present and those they’ve planted on the ranch. They include a digital image of “Hercules Club.”

Another fine photo is in: *Trees, Shrubs & Cacti of South Texas* (Everitt & Drawe, 1993)

Hybridization with closely-related *Zanthoxylum* species occurs, leading to confusion for those who read about this plant. Older name: *Zanthoxylum clava herculis* var. *fruticosum*.

An acknowledgment for Bill MacWhorter must be included here, as his work has contributed greatly to the existence of that “sensory garden” just beyond the Nature Center’s back door.

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