



“Alicoche blooms grow protected by partial shade.”

FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Echinocereus pentalophus*

Common Names: Ladyfinger Cactus, Alicoche

Family: Cactaceae (Cactus)

Arroyo Understory Glows Pink

On March 31, 2003, brightly festive Ladyfinger blossoms brightened the understory of Harlingen Thicket. The hundreds of cactus blooms I encountered were of *Echinocereus pentalophus* or *berlandieri*, probably both. Both are found in the Arroyo Brush. Each is reminiscent of long fingers, but fatter and longer than fingers of most ladies. They branch profusely, forming masses. Stems lie entirely or partly on the ground, rooting where they touch, and spreading outward. Ladyfinger cacti are known locally as *Alicoche*. They were among the earliest cacti described. Their differences are not obvious and there is a wealth of confusion about them.

Assisting in this confusion is their preference for shade. Exposed to direct sunlight, these cacti discolor to reddish-yellow, shrivel and perish. They fare best beneath a tangle of thorny shrubs and trees, where sunlight is diffused. Venturing within such a thorny tangle to examine the spine-laden mass is real adventure.

I write about Alicoche every year at this time, and much of this article is repetition. The beauty of these plants is something I look forward to each spring. I try to venture out several times to see them. One of the places to search for them in Harlingen is the brushy area within Arroyo Park, one of the access points for Harlingen’s Hike and Bike Trail. Arroyo Park is at the intersection of New Hampshire St. and Hale St. It is east of Hwy 77/83 and north of Ed Carey Dr.

Photos can’t compare to seeing these cacti in the wild. Del Weniger, premier authority on Texas Cacti, explains: “most of these cacti use protective coloration and camouflage. Pictures of them in their natural habitats...usually show little detail of the plants, if they are visible at all.”

Del Weniger’s books provided the bulk of information for this article. Both are out of print: *Cacti of Texas*, 1984. *Cacti of the Southwest*, earlier.

An excellent reference for those who would like to use native cacti in local landscapes is: *Native Plants of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, TX: Cacti, Ground Covers and Vines*, by the Native Plant Project. This concise and informative booklet, with color photographs, is available at many nature-oriented shops.

The most common Alicoche is *E. pentalophus*, described in 1826. Very old plants may form “pools” of 10 or even 15 feet in diameter. Alicoche possess groups of spines radiating from a central cluster. On new growth, these clusters are on a protuberance called a tubercle. On a typical *pentalophus*, there is no central spine. Blooms are 3 to 4 inches in diameter, with outer

and inner rows of petals, resulting in a beautiful flower, cerise-pink with a large whitish center. Central filaments are green, surrounded by yellow anthers, forming a central point of contrast. *E. pentalophus* primarily occurs in close proximity to the Rio Grande.

Bill MacWhorter showed me a typical colony of *pentalophus* growing at Valley Nature Center in Weslaco. That colony closely matches Del Weniger's description: "Light green, flabby ... slender ... mostly prostrate."

It's important to remember that cacti hybridize with each other and grow intermingled. Thus, you'll find them with an overlapping range of characteristics.

The blooms of *E. berlandieri* are similar to those of *E. pentalophus*, but wider, with fewer and more pointed petals comprising only one row. Distinguishing characteristics of *berlandieri*: stems deep green, not flabby, with conical tubercles spiraling about the stem. This is a more northern form, occurring from Laredo to Uvalde, south of San Antonio and to Corpus Christi. It is most common along the Nueces River and Rio Grande.

The blooming periods of *pentalophus* and *berlandieri* probably overlap.

The Alicoche cacti of the Rio Grande Delta and Arroyo Colorado Brush flaunt their brilliant blossoms for just a few weeks in spring. They give us good reason to visit wild places.

Cactus blooming season is an excellent time to visit Valley Nature Center in Weslaco. Repeated visits are advised, as different cacti will be blooming almost every week and some blooms only last a few days. There are several species of native cacti available for purchase in their native plant nursery, as well. Call 969-2475 for directions and information.

Unlike short-lived tender annuals sold in flats, Alicoche cacti will not perish during summer.



They will spread to cover lightly-shaded areas where people have no need to walk. They will remind us, every year, of the many miracles of spring.

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

Photographed at Harlingen's Thicket, a nature sanctuary.

Small succulent is *Sedum texanum*.

Mrs. Mild holds an M.S. in Biol. Sci. She may be contacted at RioDeltaWild@aol.com.

Return to webpage: www.riodeltawild.com