Christina Mild
RIO DELTA WILD

FLORA FACTS
Scientific Name: *Gaillardia pulchella*
Common Names: Indian Blanket, Firewheel
Family: Compositae

Indian Blanket advertises with burning color

Indian Blanket is nicely descriptive for the perennial wildflower which paints many Texas landscapes with bold tones of yellow, orange and red. Firewheel isn't a bad description, either.

There are several species of *Gaillardia* found in the LRGV in various soils and locations. Dr. Richardson describes their differences in *Plants of the Rio Grande Delta*, 1995.

Perhaps the most common is *Gaillardia pulchella*. This wildflower is classified as "useful" by wildlife biologists because the leaves are eaten by white-tailed deer. *Pulchella* is derived from the Latin *pulcher*, meaning beautiful. It doesn't hurt to be beautiful as well as useful.

Indian Blanket may bloom throughout spring and summer. A long tap root allows it to bloom despite drought and insufferable heat. One might even think the plant preferred such conditions.

Large populations adorn the roadsides of South Padre Island. I enjoy hunting for Indian Blanket near the entry to SPI Convention Center. One should not hesitate to continue looking for other kinds of blooms, butterflies and birds in the planted gardens and along the boardwalks there. Perhaps it's best that food and rest aren't available on-site. I'd be tempted not to leave.

A large population of *Gaillardia pulchella* grows in Harlingen on the sandy, north-facing bank of the Arroyo Colorado west of Loop 499. Thanks to Harlingen Parks Dept., this population has recently gained protection from off-road vehicle erosion.

Viewing that area from the road gives no inkling of the wonders to be found there. The community of plants which grows there illustrates the uniqueness of what grows in a certain soil, in full sun. Along with Firewheel are large expanses of pleasant-smelling Wedge-Leaf Prairie Clover, mats of Green-Leaf Five-Eyes and other more common blooming things. I only find that combination of plants at one place in Harlingen. The same species seem to bloom there every year.

Are these differences due to soil, sun exposure, drainage? They are likely due to all those things and more, like microbes in the soil, amount and timing of rainfall, runoff patterns and many other factors.

Firewheels are more easily inspected at Edinburg's Wetlands, where they were planted from seed. This is the first of the World Birding Center satellites to open and Edinburg can be proud of that accomplishment. Director Richard Lehman, with the help of city workers, a tiny staff, and volunteers, has successfully decorated the roadsides of the entryway with abundant wildflowers. His Firewheels earn their name; they are vibrantly red.

Surrounding the building are gardens in progress. Lehman has selected a wide variety of native plants to attract birds and butterflies. His use of dense layers of woodchip mulch and drip irrigation is the very model of water-efficient landscaping. Observing the progress of these gardens will be educational for many of us. Resident killdeer were dramatically defending nests during my visit and lark sparrows were visiting drip-ponds amongst the new plantings.

One of my favorite wildflower books is out of print, but I'm finding it at reasonable prices on the web: *Roadside Flowers of Texas*, 1961, by Mary Motz Wills and Howard S. Irwin. In the text of this book, you often find the key to how insects extract pollen or nectar from specific flowers. After I read Irwin's explanation, it all sounds quite logical. But like the laws of physics, it isn't something I'd discover on my own.

I'm noticing places around Harlingen where people are mowing around wildflowers, rather than over them. It brings a significant improvement to how our city looks.

Frequent rain continues to bring more and different wildflowers. Thanks be to God.

Technical assistance by Mike Heep, native plant nurseryman and UTPA Instructor. Mrs. Mild holds an M.S. in Biol. Sci. She may be contacted at riodeltawild@aol.com.

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