

Christina Mild
RIO DELTA WILD



“Hammock Lantana is a genuine butterfly magnet.”

FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Lantana microcephala*

Common Names: Hammock Lantana

Family: Verbenaceae (Verbenaceae)

Arroyo Brush Understory White-Blooming Lantana

Many folks are completely confused about what “understory” is or why anyone would ever mention the word. Indeed, the understory we usually see in south Texas is boring and unattractive: guinea grass and nothing else.

Understory refers to all the plants which live below the tallest plants in a forest.

Imported guinea grass grows real good in shade. It’s nicely protected under there from frost. South Texas understory in the last fifty years has changed from a diverse range of blooming herbs and vines and shrubby things to the unattractive monotony of tall grass.

In many places, unleashing cattle to eat up the stuff and turn it into fertilizer is the best way to encourage re-growth of diverse understory. Guinea grass is good forage for cattle.

Since my husband is against keeping a cow in town, I’ve invested in herbicide, a pitchfork and gloves. He bought me a bug jacket for Christmas as a form of encouragement.

Anyhow, in the few places where guinea grass has not managed to overwhelm everything else, we may find all sorts of plants. Many have the potential to enhance our yards with their own beauty. They will typically attract a wide range of beautiful birds and butterflies, as well.

Guinea grass is not the only agent of understory destruction. People have this notion that everything beneath a tree should be cleared out, transforming the world into settings reminiscent of a city park. This idea imperils a whole bunch of critters, including ourselves, if you get right down to the nitty-gritty of things.

One of the almost-extirpated understory plants is an innocuous white bloomer not often lauded in print. It’s known by at least three botanical names, necessitating complex information digging. Because of that I asked for help. Bill Carr, Ann Vacek, Dr. Al Richardson and Mike Heep provided vital information about the elusive *Lantana microcephala*. (This translates to “tiny head,” probably referring to the small flowers.)

Mike Heep reveals this about the thornless little shrub, which he successfully propagates: “In the places where it does occur, which aren't many, it's absolutely beautiful after the rains. *Mucho* heads of white flowers. I know it from some places along the Arroyo. Billy (Joe Snider, Jr.) showed me a little on the Hunke Ranch once. Likes partial sun, kinda’ looks sick if it gets all day sun. A very attractive little ornamental.”

Dr. Robert Vines included a drawing of the plant in *Trees, Shrubs, and Woody Vines of the Southwest* (1960). *Lantana citrosa*, as it was known then, refers to a citrus-like aromatic odor. To me, it smells like lettuce.

The published blooming period is February thru August, though my plant has bloomed throughout winter, probably because I water it. Blooms help to distinguish this from similar plants. A cluster of small white blossoms throated in yellow crowns stacks of green bractlets containing dry black seed. These are fruit and remains of previous blossoms. (Please see photo.)

Pointed and elongated light green leaves also distinguish this from other lantanas.

Hammock lantana is known to occur only in Cameron and Hidalgo counties in Texas. It also occurs in southern Florida and south to Mexico and Guatemala.

I've photographed a wide range of butterflies nectaring on plants at Laguna Atascosa NWR and Weslaco's Valley Nature Center. It's a great choice for butterfly gardens.

I'm growing it in the worst soil and location imaginable, my front yard. It's compacted clay which barely holds water, visited daily by myriad dogs which squirt and dig. Hammock Lantana keeps on blooming despite these poor odds. I did follow Heep's advice to plant it in the shade.

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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