## Christina Mild RIO DELTA WILD



"Carolina Bristle Mallow carpets a Los Fresnos roadside."

## FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Modiola caroliniana* 

Common Names: Carolina Bristle Mallow

Family: Malvaceae (Mallow)

## **Pretty Easter Egg Hiding Place**

When my daughter was small, we were excited to see soft spring grasses and herbs emerge, as they were great for hiding Easter eggs.

We played "find the Easter eggs" not once or twice, but several times a day.

One of the prettiest plants I can imagine for hiding a colored egg is

Carolina Bristle Mallow. I suppose there's good reason for that "bristle" in the name, but bristly isn't how I remember the plant after close exposure with it.

The leaves remind me of parsley, and it seems that rabbits would happily nibble them. But perhaps not. There are reports of livestock toxicity, though I find no specifics. Livestock probably doesn't mean rabbits.

Dr. Richardson e-mailed me when he found *Modiola* a bit north of Los Fresnos on a roadside. Some of my friends who pursue wildflowers organized a trip to see just what was there. A close inspection of the area revealed incredible beauty and diversity one would not expect when driving by. To truly enjoy wildflowers one must disembark from the automobile.

One should be cautious on such adventures. My friend Diann Ballesteros discovered a small rattlesnake amongst a gorgeous stand of wildflowers north of Harlingen on Hwy 77.

We had been in that area quite a long time, trying to find the identity of a plant. It turned out to be Rattlesnake Weed! Diann took me over to hear the snake's warning, which was hard to notice with a blustering wind and constant vehicle traffic. It reminded me of insects buzzing. Who knows how many rattlesnakes try to warn me without success.

*Modiola* grows like a ground-covering mat sprinkled with small bursts of floral color. Several of the plants we saw covered at least nine sq. ft. The wonderful colors of the foliage and blooms

bring to mind the skin-enhancing vitamins in leafy green vegetables. I didn't taste the plant, but was sorely tempted. Aging skin needs all the help it can get.

According to the USDA Plants Database, *Modiola caroliniana* is native to the U.S. and occurs in about half the states, including Hawaii. It also occurs in much of tropical America. Mike Heep has seen it growing near Monterrey.

In New Zealand, *Modiola* is the host plant of a beautiful butterfly, the Blue Moon. On the website of New Zealand Butterflies, one finds a photograph of a leaf laden with butterfly eggs. Clicking on the photograph several times brings up sequential images in the life cycle of the Blue Moon: small larvae to a mature one, a chrysalis and the splendid adult. This is what many butterfly lovers wish for, a better way to visualize the developing butterflies one hopes to discover in a wildscape.

We have yet to discover which butterflies, if any, use this plant in our area.

Carolina Bristle Mallow is tolerant of salt and drought, which is probably why it survives the Los Fresnos roadside. It is considered a weed of grasslands.

Prostrate stems root at the nodes, giving *Modiola* the ability to stabilize soil and prevent erosion. During this very windy season that is a real advantage.

The name *Modiola* is from the Latin *modiolus* (the hub of a wheel), and is a reference to the shape of the fruit. Many seeds are tightly packed to form the shape of a wheel. Collecting the fruit from roadside plants is probably necessary for propagating *Modiola*. It has received little attention in this area.

Diann Ballesteros tells me that there are roughly 5000 wildflower species in Texas alone. Perhaps this explains why it is impossible to find photographs of the least common ones. God willing, I plan to photograph a bunch of them.

It is truly unfortunate that tax season coincides with wildflower blooms. It would be preferable, I think, to stay indoors searching thru receipts and documents in an insufferably hot month like August. Perhaps next year I should file for an extension!

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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