

Christina Mild
RIO DELTA WILD



FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name:

Priva lappulacea

Common Names:

Common Velvet Burr

Family: Verbena

Common Velvet Burr Is Infrequently Encountered

I first encountered *Priva lappulacea* in Spring of 2003, following good amounts of rainfall. The small plant was noticeable along Sabal Palm Grove trails because butterflies nectared on the tiny blooms.

Unable to find a matching photograph in published field guides for this area, I sent a digital photo to several plant experts. Mike Heep recognized the plant immediately. "I've tried to grow it before," Heep related, "but it dries up and disappears in dry weather."

Since that initial encounter, I've seen this little Common Velvet Burr in many other places. It grows at Sabal Palm Grove, James & Georgiana Matz' brush near Rio Hondo, Drew Benney's yard in San Benito, Los Ebanos Preserve butterfly gardens, C. B. Wood Park and Mr. Frank Boggus' woods in Harlingen.

It is possible that Common Velvet Burr appears in many other undisturbed places after ample rainfall. More and more people tell me that they rely on photographs in printed field guides to identify plants which are unknown to them. Thus the plant, if noticed, is probably unrecognizable to most of the local populace, even those with an interest in native plants.

After ample rains in the fall of 2003, I am once again finding this delicate and attractive plant in many places. In these places, one might also be alert for the Potrillo Skipper, which utilizes *Priva lappulacea* as a host plant.

Many butterfly species utilize the plant's nectar, despite the tiny size of the bluish flowers. A color variation I've noticed occurs at Los Ebanos Preserve, where specimens in the butterfly garden bore white flowers rather than blue.

Upon very close examination, one finds two parallel rows of short, straight spines upon the small fruit pod. This is likely the "burr" of the common name. Cat's Tongue is a common name used in Florida, perhaps in reference to the shape and texture of roughly-hairy leaves.

Photographs of the delicate plant are not available on websites or in LRGV field guides. One does find *Priva lappulacea* listed on the "Global Compendium of Weeds" website. Few would

consider it aggressive enough to be considered a weed in south Texas. One website lists the plant's status in Texas as "critically imperiled," and I am inclined to concur.

The range of the plant includes only Florida and Texas in the U.S. It may be limited in Texas to Cameron County, where it can be found in fields, thickets,



resacas and roadsides. It is a cosmopolitan weed in the tropics and subtropics of the New World and has become naturalized in Java. (Correll & Johnston, *Manual of the Vascular Plants of Texas*, 1979.)

Because *Priva lappulacea* is so common in tropical areas, it has earned a variety of common names: *Cadillo de Bolsa*, *Bur-Vervain*, *Pegajosa*, *Globito*, *Mozote de Gallina*, *Mozote de Pollo* and *Cola de Alacran*.

The height of the plant rarely exceeds one meter, thus it can easily escape notice.

Those who move to this area from the Midwest often bemoan the lack of distinct seasons, reminiscing over the absence of autumn leaves and icicles.

On the opposite end of that spectrum is the unchanging nature of plants selected for typical landscaping. We most often select landscapes filled with plants which bloom and retain unchanging foliage throughout the year. These are selected because they will always look the same, no matter what the season.

Even predictable beauty can become boring.

In order to enjoy plants which proliferate only in certain seasons, it is necessary to leave some spaces undisturbed by digging. Thick layers of mulch would also prevent the emergence of such delicate plants as *Priva lappulacea*, even if sufficient moisture and seed were available.

The seasonal changes in south Texas are less dramatic than ice storms and piles of fallen leaves. To see and fully appreciate them, one observes more carefully and walks more slowly in the few special places where nature has been little disturbed.

Fall is a good time to venture out to a wild place, perhaps even to a stretch of neglected roadside. One never knows what might be discovered there.

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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