

Christina Mild  
**RIO DELTA WILD**

Publication Date: June 14, 2003

“Native in much of Texas, Mealy Sage once adorned LRGV roadsides.”

FLORA FACTS (color and grayscale images sent)

Scientific Name: *Salvia farinacea*

Common Names: Mealy Sage

Family: Labiatae (Mint)



### **Summer Wildflowers Abound at Ramsey Nature Park**

Mealy Sage was planted at Ramsey Nature Park last fall by volunteers, the Arroyo Colorado Audubon Society (ACAS). Seed scattered in the fall and transplants brought in later have added a spectrum of vibrant color to the former landfill.

James Matz began the first efforts to diversify Ramsey's plant species, bringing together organizations, government agencies, local businesses and volunteers. The fruits of those early efforts are eaten every day by birds, rabbits, Mexican ground squirrels and myriad other creatures. ACAS has brought a new burst of energy to that endeavor, with support from Harlingen Parks Dept. and grants from Great Coastal Birding Classic prize-winners.

Because volunteers are watering adjacent to Ramsey's trails, many wildflowers are showing their true nature as “perennials,” continuing to bloom into summer. Mealy Sage is one of these.

Although Mealy Sage is not native to the LRGV, many who grew up in the valley consider it a local wildflower. It's been cultivated for many years, in many places, and was once seen growing “wild” along valley roadsides. It naturally occurs in much of the state, with the exception of the northeast, southeast and south central regions.

According to Geyata Agilvski, Mealy Sage frequents “dry, often rocky, calcareous or chalky soils in prairies, plains, chaparral, edges and openings of woodlands and on hillsides and slopes.” (Wildflowers of Texas, 1984, recently revised.)

Howard S. Irwin speculates that Mealy Sage is probably “the most widely distributed” of the twenty species of sage occurring wild in Texas. (Roadside Flowers of Texas, 1961.) Irwin's notes on pollination of wildflower species are treasures of insight. He says this about the structure of sage flowers:

“A close look ... reveals a number of interesting mechanisms, all directed toward insuring cross-pollination...the firm upper lip...protects the nectar from dilution by rain, and shields the two anthers and the style. The larger lower lip serves both to attract and to support insects, which then push inward to the base of the ovary for the nectar. As they do this their backs are dusted by pollen if the flower is young, or are “scratched” by the pollen-receptive stigma flaps in older flowers.”

You can see all this happening near the composting toilet at Ramsey Park, where the blue spikes of Mealy Sage attract all sorts of winged pollinators.

It may surprise you that extensive volunteer time at Ramsey Park involves watering native plants. Many hold the misconception that plants native to this area require no water. This idea has led to the demise of more than a few plants.

Many native plants have the miraculous capability to retain moisture until the time comes for them to blossom, produce leaves, or bear fruit. Once a native plant has grown an extensive root system, it has a good chance of surviving through extended drought. It may not look great, but it will “hang in there” until moisture arrives.

It takes time to develop an adequate root system. Moist soil in contact with existing roots is necessary for most plants to grow enough roots for long-term survival.

Many plant species have been added at Ramsey in recent months. These plants are not yet “established.”

In addition, plants will produce more fruit, nectar and leaves when they receive adequate water. Thus, diverse brush is a well-stocked restaurant for local wildlife when rainfall is adequate or when somebody volunteers to water.

Without sufficient moisture, native brush is much like the restaurant my family once visited in Baja, California. "We'll have huevos rancheros," we told the young waitress (in Spanish). "No hay," she replied. As we proceeded down the menu items, "no hay," was the typical response. When we realized they had no chiles, it was clear how desperate the situation was.

That's how it is for wild critters when the brush country is dry. Not even *chiltipin* can bear fruit.

Man has diverted the water which once brought annual flooding along the Rio Grande to fill our resacas. It's up to us to give a bit of moisture back to those wild places. Green turf is pretty, but lizards and Texas Tortoises and brightly-colored birds are much more exciting. What many are choosing at this point in time is water-guzzling lawn and all the hassle which comes with it.

One of my favorite attitudes about lawns was expressed by a fellow upon reaching the antiquarian age of 50. His enthusiasm for lawns completely faded, he explained, when he realized that he'd ultimately be resting beneath "Forest Lawn."

If you'd like to see some alternatives to growing grass in your yard, come on over to Ramsey Park in Harlingen (on Loop 499 just south of Harrison St. and north of the arroyo bridge). You'll see that there are plenty of other choices available. I hope to see you 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](mailto:RioDeltaWild@aol.com).

Return to <http://www.RioDeltaWild.com>