

Christina Mild
RIO DELTA WILD

“Gold springtime blooms of *Selenia grandis* occur only in Texas.”

FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name:

Selenia grandis

Common Names: Texas Gold

Family: Mustard

Springtime Special Is Endemic to Texas

Digital cameras and fast internet connections can lead to almost instant gratification of many desires. One of my most frequent is the identification of a

plant I've found. Fortunately, I have wise, willing, patient computer-using friends who happily help out.

A few weeks ago, I saw bright yellow blooms on vacant lots near St. Paul's school in Harlingen. After passing several times on hurried errands, curiosity prevailed. I stopped to look them over. The blooms were something I'd never encountered, large and gold, the size of *Amapola del Campo*, which is pink.

Of course I tried to look up the plant in wildflower books, with no luck.

None of my helpful plant experts could identify it from the first photos, so I returned to examine it more closely. I worked carefully, using “macro” mode, focusing on the sexual parts of the flower. As intrusive as this would seem on a plant's privacy, it's often essential to identification. Not only did I find sexual parts, but the result of much sexual activity. Insects laden with pollen were busily moving from one flower to the next. On long trailing stems, I found swollen freckled seedpods, not yet ripe, each holding perhaps 30 seeds.

Bill Carr of Texas Nature Conservancy identified *Selenia grandis* from photos I attached to an e-mail. “It's a Texas endemic.” Bill informed me. He saw it blooming the previous day in San Patricio.

Recently, Bill sent detailed information about where the plant has previously been collected by local botanists. At this point in time we still know little about *Selenia grandis*. Bill says it may be one of those plants which “fall below the radar” of most people.

Brownsville's former mayor Robert Runyon collected *Selenia grandis* on several occasions, first on 3 Mar 1925 about 2 mi north of Harlingen on a roadside. He next collected it on 21 Jan 1942 on Zillock Rd 2 miles north of San Benito. On 8 Feb 1944, he collected a specimen from clay soil near Rio Hondo. Runyon ventured out to Hidalgo County, as well, collecting near Santa Ana, 10 miles south of Hidalgo, on 13 Apr 1941.



H. Gentry collected the plant west of Brownsville on 24 Mar 1941. H. B. Parks made a collection near Santa Rosa on 12 Mar 1936.

From this information, we might continue to look for *Selenia grandis* as late as April. As a cool-weather plant, it probably dries beyond recognition as temperatures rise and moisture disappears.

Perhaps *Selenia grandis* is also blooming now in Hidalgo County. Collections include the following: D. S. Correll 9 Feb 1969 from moist soil of irrigation ditch overflow 7 mi S of San Juan. Correll collected on that same date from low ground about 3 mi S of San Juan. On 14 Feb 1974, Dr. Jim Everitt found the plant 5 miles south of Pharr along the Military Highway.

The most recent local collection was by S. & G. Jones, who collected on 12 Jan 1992 from black clay roadside soil south of San Juan.

Few have seen this plant alive and well. Pressed, mounted, dry and shriveled specimens are our best evidence of when and where this plant has been seen. It's certainly prettier when it's still alive. The aroma is wondrous.

Selenia grandis occurs only in Texas, in five counties, making it an endemic. It's a springtime wildflower of the Mustard family. Does it grow near St. Paul's every spring? I have no idea. The people I encountered nearby were completely uninterested in any wildflowers until I pointed them out. They thought those vacant lots were in bad need of mowing.

Human behavior is odd. We buy springtime bulbs and tender annuals boxed up in cardboard and plastic and shipped around the world. Then we carefully plant, fertilize and weed around them, knowing they'll be gone forever when hot weather returns.

Nature's springtime gift of wildflowers is typically mown down before producing seed. We fail to value the uniqueness of something wild which surfaces in cool weather, dies back in the heat, and miraculously reappears again in spring.

There's no way that a plant which markets itself only in south Texas with a one inch golden bloom and a wonderful smell can compete with the modern nursery industry.

Human respect for the unexpected blossoms nature provides is the defense our native flora must depend upon. Saving those gifts is something each of us can help with.

UPDATE: Since publishing this article in Feb. 2003, *Selena grandis* has reappeared during January of 2004 and 2005. There are hundreds of blooms, Jan. 25, 2005 south of Harlingen's Home Depot on Hwy. 801. Plants are located adjacent to sugarcane fields, scattered among remaining sorghum plants from remains of a harvested crop, and along the highway right of way.

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.

Return to Website: www.riodeltawild.com.

ENLARGED SEEDPOD with typical spots.

