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RIO DELTA WILD

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large PHOTO CAPTION:
Velvety leaves of *Lantana velutina* may smell like rhubarb.

FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Lantana velutina*

Common Names: Velvetleaf Lantana, Oregano Xiu

Family: Verbenaceae



White Blooming Velutina Attracts Butterflies

Velvetleaf Lantana grows beautifully in Ramsey Nature Park. Several specimens were acquired by Sue Griffin and Billy Joe Snider, Jr. a few years ago for a revegetation project.

As these plants came into their prime, I was working up signage for the park and couldn't identify the plant. It looked a bit like Desert Lantana. The fruits are similar, but the leaves aren't the same. Ramsey's white bloomers looked a bit like the Hammock Lantana which graces the understory of James and Georgiana Matz' Arroyo Colorado brush near Rio Hondo. But those leaves are more elongated into a point, a lighter shade of green and lack the finely toothed leaf edges.

Published information on white-blooming Lantanas is so confusing that I was in a muddle. So I began pestering Mike Heep to figure out an I.D. for the gorgeous white-blooming Lantana which has grown so well at Ramsey Park. True to form, Heep figured out what it was (*Lantana velutina*) and, even better, how to grow it.

Is *Lantana velutina* beneficial to birds? Heep thinks it is. "They pick the fruit off before I get a chance to collect it," he explains.

Dr. Alfred Richardson of Brownsville grows two species of native white-blooming Lantana, having acquired both from Heep. "The growth is outstanding," Al tells me, in regards to Velvetleaf Lantana. He continues, describing the plant's appearance in his yard in early November. "*Lantana velutina* looks as if it has just been watered and fertilized – bright green foliate, and lots of flower heads. It shows no sign of insect damage. I'm very enthusiastic about it for a garden plant."



In virtually every season, Velvetleaf Lantana has been attractive in Ramsey Park, with a bit of supplemental watering to promote blooms. I was amazed that it suffered little damage from the December 2004 snowfall. The leaves of most other species of native and cultivated Lantana were killed by the cold. They took quite awhile to recuperate.

Dr. Richardson's comment regarding insect damage is equally important. Many of our colorful Lantanas seem to attract more than their share of insects, viruses and mold. They transform rapidly from gorgeous to tragic in appearance.

The online herbarium of Texas A & M University gives these details regarding *Lantana velutina*: "Velvet Lantana can be found in open woods, thickets, mesas, sandy loams, cliffs and dry soils of the South Texas Plains. It stands up to 6 1/2 feet tall and has a rhubarb odor. The leaves are about 1 1/2 inches long and 1 inch wide. The flowers start as white with a yellow throat and then turn lavender or pinkish as they age. The young flowers begin in the middle of the bunch of flowers giving it the appearance of white in the center and pink or lavender on the outer edges. The fruit of this plant is bluish-black... Velvet Lantana blooms from February to June."

In this area, we see a different picture. Velvet Lantana seems to bloom in Ramsey Park throughout the year. I haven't seen or photographed the flowers in any shade of lavender or pink. Older stems have an attractive dark red tint, a very nice contrast to the lovely velvet green of new foliage. The "rhubarb" odor smells to me like a typical "Lantana" smell, a bit less pungent than the brightly-colored Lantanas. I haven't seen a bluish-black fruit, either. The birds probably eat the fruits before they darken, or fruits drop from the plant before they reach this stage of ripeness. New specimens are coming up in Ramsey where nobody planted them. They're appearing where I've distributed the small fruits and where rainfall has subsequently washed them.

Most sources report *Lantana velutina* to be widely-distributed in Mexico. An old book given to me by Bernice Thompson provides further information in this regard. The book is P. C. Standley's "Trees and Shrubs of Mexico." It's a compilation of Standley's contributions to the United States National Herbarium from 1920 to 1926. It's a difficult publication to find. Bernice found it in the Library's room of discarded volumes for sale. Standley's work is the best English-language publication I'm aware of on woody plants of Mexico. It's an incredible resource for local botanists, as many if not most of our native plants are found in greater numbers across the border.

Standley lists the botanical name for Velvetleaf Lantana as *Lantana involucrata*, with *Lantana velutina* as a synonym.

He also lists a wide range of common names, different ones in common use in various Mexican states. In Tamaulipas, the plant was known as Oregano and peonia colorada. In Sinaloa, it was called confite. In Michoacan, tarepe was the common name. Cuba, El Salvador and Guatemala each had different names for this plant.

Standley credits a fellow botanist, Palmer, regarding medicinal use of the plant in Tamaulipas. "...pieces of the leaves or stems are put in the ears as a cure for deafness." Perhaps people speak more clearly if they see foliage protruding from your ears!

Reports on edibility are a bit scary. Some sources list all parts of the plant as toxic; others report that Tarahumara Indians consumed the ripened fruit. My advice is to admire the plant rather than eating it.

In Florida, this or a very similar species of native Lantana is listed as *Lantana involucrata*.

Regardless of what name you call it, this white-blooming, velvet-leaved Lantana grows very well here. Martin Hagne of the Valley Nature Center recently planted a specimen acquired from Mike Heep. "It does grow fast, I can say that," Martin reports. "We planted a small plant about 1' and few stems... which a month later is at least 2' and bushy and very healthy." Martin thinks he's found this species growing in the wild. "I have found a stand in Willacy County about 2 weeks ago on a private tract of land just north of the Cameron Co line. It is unconfirmed as of yet, but I am almost 100% (certain) it's *velutina*," Martin tells me.

Mike Heep has encountered *Lantana velutina* growing out on one of the lomas which rise from the sands along the coast. It isn't a plant you see often.

Heep assures me that this pretty white bloomer will be available this weekend at the Birding Festival in Harlingen's Municipal Auditorium. Native Plant Project volunteers will be offering this and other native plants for sale at their booth in the Trade Show.



Master Gardeners will have some nicely-adapted plants for sale at their booth as well, including things for humans to eat. Mike's wife Claire has grown some wonderful things to be sold by the Master Gardeners.

In late November, I'll be giving a talk about "Dusty Old Botanical Treasures" like the book Bernice found for me in the discard room. That talk is sponsored by the Native Plant Project and will take place at Weslaco's Valley Nature Center on Tuesday evening, November 22nd at 7:30 p.m. Creating a PowerPoint presentation is tedious, so I'm finding diversion in planning my jokes

and evening attire. Hope to see you there!

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