

GARDENS IN BLOOM

(week of Feb. 7, 2021)

The South Texas Botanical Gardens & Nature Center currently offers limited classes, and no weekend Rep-Tales and Parrot Talk, due to COVID-19 protocol, plus health and safety of guests. Fulfilling its horticulture, environmental education and conservation mission, **GARDENS IN BLOOM**, each week spotlights a featured tropical and native plant—to enjoy on a visit this week, or possibly enhance your landscape!

SHRIMP PLANT (*Justicia brandegeana*)

Shrimp plant is a member of the Acanthus Family (*Acanthaceae*), a large group including favorites like firecracker plant (*Russelia equisetiformis*), flame acanthus (*Ansiscanthus wrightii*), and Mexican petunias (*Ruellia* sp.).

A tropical herbaceous perennial native to Mexico, Shrimp Plant commonly grows 24-30 inches tall and 3 feet wide. It blooms year-round, providing nectar for hummingbirds and butterflies, notably in South Texas winters when few plants bloom. Reddish/maroon blossoms 3-4 inches long really are made up of bracts (modified leaves) which retain color longer to attract pollinators. The white 1–1.5 inch tubular blossom emergin like legs on a shrimp is the true flower! Each "shrimp" inflorescence may produce 20-30 white flowers in 1-2 months.

Branches are distinctively segmented at nodes where leaves are attached, with additional branches emerging at these points. Slightly fuzzy leaves covered with plant hairs usually are an inch wide and 1-2 inches long. Shrimp Plant needs periodic pruning to control size. Pruning in late spring or early summer, after other plants are in full bloom, is recommended. To attract hummers, avoid pruning within 4-5 weeks before the September/October major hummingbird migration.

See Shrimp Plant in the Sensory and Hummingbird Gardens, and Butterfly Hill behind the Sensory Garden.

TEXAS SABAL PALM (*Sabal mexicana*)

Texas Sabal, a member of the Palm Family (*Arecaceae*), has several common names such as Mexican Sabal Palm, Texas or Mexican Palmetto, Rio Grande Palmetto, Victoria Palmetto, Palma de Micharos, and Apachite. The much smaller palmetto (*Sabal minor*) is the only other native species in Texas.

Texas Sabal Palms are similar to their Florida cousin, the cabbage palm, or Florida Sabal (*Sabal palmetto*); but has a larger trunk--commonly 18-30 inches in diameter--and larger fronds, different than common Mexican Fan Palms (*Washingtonia robusta*). Sabal palm fronds are blue-green instead of bright yellow-green. Also, a large Texas Sabal Palm frond can be 3 feet wide, with a slight downward arch helping them hold shape in strong wind. They also are more cold-tolerant than *Washingtonia* palms, surviving historic 1980s freezes!

The slow-growing Texas Sabal may not show any trunk for up to 10 years after sprouting from seed, making them more expensive in retail outlets. We often see 10-20foot trees, but mature Sabal Palms can reach 50 feet! Native stands of Texas Sabal Palms still are found from Rio Grande Valley through Central America; but historically, they grew naturally along rivers in the Coastal Bend, and as far north as San Antonio. The only remaining Texas native stand is at Brownsville Sabal Palm Audubon Sanctuary, which extends into Northern Mexico.

Three prominent Texas Sabals form a triangle in the Botanical Gardens parking lot; with a taller single tree near the Arid Garden--all rescued and transplanted from an older Corpus Christi neighborhood more than 20 years ago, with assistance of the Devary Durrill Foundation.

