

Texas Lantana

By Marilyn Sallee on May 24th, 2011

Texas Lantana laughs at hazards that can wipe out lesser plants; it resists drought, heat, deer, and salt.

It doesn't even emerge from the ground until things really warm up. And then it springs from the roots so fast, it seems to magically appear full grown in a few warm weeks.

It thrives in the full summer sun and heat, requiring little water once established, and can be used as a shrubby ground cover in dry, poor soil. It takes the blistering heat of summer to bring it into its own, covering the entire shrub with multi-colored flowers through the worst triple-digit heat.

It is deciduous, dropping all leaves in the winter and leaving stems of gray, shaggy bark. These can be cut to the ground to keep the shrub small, or left to grow into thick trunk and branches. The wood of the lantana is especially tough and durable and has been used for weaving and crafts.



Texas lantana (photo by Bill Lindemann)

But there is one plant treatment that doesn't seem to faze most other plants but can kill lantana—never spray it with insecticidal soap. That common pest treatment can kill a lantana. Most insect know better than to mess with lantana anyway.

Texas lantana produces deep purple-black berries which are poisonous to most mammals, including cattle, sheep and humans. However many birds relish them and spread the seeds.

Birds are not the only wildlife to benefit. Bees use the nectar in honey production. Texas lantana, with its verbena tube flowers, is an excellent food-source for many nectaring butterflies, especially swallowtails, hairstreaks, skippers, sulphurs and brush-foot butterflies. It is also a crucial food source for the larva of the Lantana Scrub-Hairstreak butterfly.

Lantana has so many excellent traits; every common name for it tells us a good thing about this plant which is a staple in heat-scored Texas gardens:

Calico bush — for the patchwork colors in the flower clusters that turn colors as they age from yellow to orange to red. Because of the color combination, it was sometimes nicknamed “bacon ‘n eggs”. (Note: non-native *Lantana camara* flowers are pink and yellow, giving it the nickname “ham ‘n eggs”) Those flowers bloom from April through October, and become most spectacular in the worst heat of the summer.

West Indian shrub-verbena — for the verbena-like flowers – yes, it is in the Verbena Family. West Indian from the Native American tribes that used the plants to treat snake-bite, the leaves

as poultice for wounds and teas as a stomach tonic. And shrub – because it is a low-growing shrub.

The original scientific name of *Lantana horrida* refers to the strong smell of the leaves that can affect sensitive persons. Thankfully, botanist August von Hayek re-named it *Lantana urticoides*, calling upon its resemblance with nettles (the *Urtica* family) in this new name; *urticoides* just means “like a nettle”.

Propagation is most easily done by dividing the roots in winter while it is dormant. Just cut out a clump of the root system from a mature stand with a sharp-shooter shovel, or dig out the entire rootball and divide into many smaller shrubs. They’ll all grow back big and strong.

It can also be propagated by cuttings in mid-summer to fall with greenwood non-flowering shoot cuttings 3-5 inches long, rooted in well drained medium. *Lantana* also produces copious berries that turn from green to a deep blue-black when ripe. Seeds should be planted in light medium in late winter to spring and may take 40-60 days to germinate.

Lantanas have been the subject of much cross-breeding and experimentation. A line of sterile lantanas has been bred to cut down on the spread of seeds which have become invasive in some countries, especially Australia and Israel. This cross-breeding makes for great variety in colors and forms, but also difficulty in determining the parent-stock and lineage. Many of the named varieties for sale in nurseries may be far removed from Texas lantana, yet still sold under that name.

Tropical lantana, *Lantana camara*, is native to Mexico through Venezuela. However, it is often sold in Texas or cross-bred. *L. camara* has been listed as a category one “Invasive Toxic Species” by the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council, and has become a problem in Texas and Hawaii.

Substitution or crossbreeding with *L. camara* has produced many increasingly popular lines of non-native lantanas named with the word “gold”, such as Basket of Gold , Gold Rush or New Gold lantanas. Especially tricky are the newer *L. camaras* with Texas names, such as Dallas Red, which is still *L. camara*.

Another South American import mixed with our native is known as weeping, trailing or purple lantana, *L. montevidensis*. This one has been introduced so world-wide that it has become a noxious or invasive species out of its native habitat of South America.