



Christina Mild
RIO DELTA WILD

“Cenizo blooms magnificently after good rainfall.”

FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Leucophyllum frutescens*
Common Names: Cenizo, Barometer Bush
Family: Scrophulariaceae

Cenizo Isn't Actually a Sage

There are more than a dozen species of
Leucophyllum in southwestern United States and
Mexico. Known as *cenizo* (for the ashen appearance of

their leaves) these shrubs bloom in response to high humidity or rainfall. Hence the name
Barometer Bush.

Leucophyllum frutescens is the botanic name of these gray-green shrubs which adorn so
many wild places in the LRGV. Typical bloom color is pale-violet to purple or almost pink. White
blooms are also encountered. Mike Heep tells me that he rarely finds white-blooming cenizo in the
wild.

Following 5-8 inches of rain in the Harlingen area in late September, early October finds
cenizo loaded with abundant blooms of atypically large size. In the wild area adjacent to C. B.
Wood Park were *cenizo* blooms twice the usual size, glorious at heights far above my head, ten
feet up or possibly twelve. Typical *cenizo* height is much lower, as is our typical rainfall.

Mike Heep reminds me that this plant has many different leaf and flower colors. Heep
recalls the work of local *cenizo* expert Norman Maxwell, who propagated many varieties in years
past. “In the 70’s,” Heep tells me, “all available container grown *cenizo* in the valley either came
from Norman Maxwell, or from Monrovia Nursery, in Azusa, California.”

Cenizo cultivation has become big business throughout the southwest, as this native plant is
readily accepted for landscaping in even the most formal of gardens. The bloom and foliage colors
contrast beautifully with more intense green shades of many other plants.

The need to conserve water makes *cenizo* an excellent landscaping choice, as studies show
the plant to be especially efficient in water use.

Native Plant Project president Gene Lester maintains an exquisite hedge in his country-club
yard in Harlingen’s Palm Valley. His pruning method is simple, but precise. The shrub is slightly
rounded, the top more narrow than the base. This, Lester explains, allows all parts of the hedge to
receive ample sunlight. Other trimming methods lead to leafless “dead” zones at the plant’s base.

For those who desire consistency throughout a mass planting, specific “varieties” are used.
One of these is Convent Cenizo. The website of Native Texas Nursery www.nativetexas-nursery.com gives these details: “*Leucophyllum frutescens* 'Convent' - Convent Cenizo. Convent
Cenizo was a selection made at the Uvalde Experiment Station for its beautiful dark rosy-purple
blooms. The silver foliage provides the traditional *cenizo* look with a brighter than usual flower.
An (almost) evergreen shrub that needs well-drained alkaline soils.”

The information this nursery provides about the plants they sell is commendable. (For non-natives offered for sale, the country of origin is disclosed.) Here is their description of where *Cenizo* naturally occurs:

“*Cenizo's* native range is from Northern Mexico through the Rio Grande Plains and Trans-Pecos, sparingly in the Western Edwards Plateau, into New Mexico. It grows on rocky caliche slopes and stony, calcareous soils. It is extremely drought and heat tolerant and maintenance-free once established.”

The popularity of this often-blooming and widely-occurring native plant has led to a plethora of common names and great confusion. Texas Sage and Purple Sage are commonly employed, though *cenizo* lacks the square stems of a typical sage, doesn't smell anything like sage, and is more closely-related to snapdragons.

Native plant grower and landscaper Benito Trevino, of Rio Grande City, recommends a tea from the leaves of *cenizo* for medicinal use. Dr. Vines reports: “It is used by the Mexican Indians for the treatment of chills and fever.” (Robert A. Vines, *Trees, Shrubs and Woody Vines of the Southwest* 1960.)

Cenizo tea is comforting for congestion, coughing and malaise of the common cold. The doctor in my house refuses such treatment and compares the tea's aroma to smelly sweat socks. Perhaps it isn't the tea that he's smelling.

Excellent details about the use of *cenizo* in the LRGV can be found at <www.nativeplant-project.org>. This entity, the Native Plant Project, tells us that *cenizo* is the foodplant for Theona Checkerspot butterflies. Deer also consume the leaves.

Those who prefer to preserve the wide diversity of leaf and bloom color found in wild populations of *Cenizo* are wise to buy plants from local suppliers of native plants. These growers propagate from seed or cuttings acquired from a variety of plants throughout the many biotic regions occurring in the LRGV.

Cenizo is typically described as intolerant of poor drainage and requiring full sun. Yet, in Cameron county, *Cenizo* with leaves more green than gray can be found in poorly-drained clay and, rarely, growing in shade. Such genetic variations may enable this species to survive ongoing environmental change.

As man continues to remove topsoil, exposing underlying clay, many new homes are built on yards with poor drainage. In addition, many of us are trying to add diversity to areas shaded by fences, homes and trees.

The need to preserve genetic diversity for future generations is a challenge faced by each of us. This need is often at odds with accepted local custom and will require many changes in thought and behavior.

Within the area now enclosed by fence and known as Harlingen Thicket grew a small colony of white-blooming *Cenizo*. For several years, I collected seed from that colony for revegetation in Ramsey Nature Park. I am no longer able to find that colony. Extensive bulldozing took place in the area, presumably by developers of housing now adjacent.

A white-blooming variety was propagated in years past by Mr. Maxwell. Heep believes that Maxwell's son found it north of Port Isabel, probably on *Loma De La Grulla*. That *loma* lies near an expanding gold course.

It is common, I am told, for developers to bulldoze wide areas adjacent to property they own. One obvious reason is pushing brush piles off the development site to save hauling expense. Drainage improvement to developed home sites is another. Presumably, real estate often sells better if there is no adjacent brush, as prospective homebuyers fear the wild animals which may creep into their yards.

The national trend towards golf courses with native landscaping can have far-reaching positive impacts, as more of our populace gains familiarity with the native plants they encounter.

As we learn to enjoy the changing delights of wild spaces, we may become brave enough to preserve and guard them.



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