



The Forum

NEWSLETTER INFO

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NEWSLETTER PUBLISHER

Peel, Inc.www.PEELinc.com, 512-263-9181

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To find out more about these events and who to contact, please visit our website at www.rrnewneighbors.org

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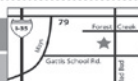
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NATURE WATCH

A THISTLE EPISTLE

by Jim and Lynne Weber



A Mexican Yellow butterfly nectaring on a Texas Thistle.

As one of the most wrongly maligned and misunderstood group of wildflowers, native thistles have never been truly embraced, not even by wildscape gardeners or habitat restoration practitioners. While these plants play a significant role in our ecosystems, they have been a direct casualty of habitat loss, first by plow-based agriculture and followed by the continual development of roads and cities. Further, recent invasions of non-native, exotic thistle species and the inability to discern them from the superficially similar native species, have contributed to their unjustified reputation and ongoing demise.

Native thistles are a beautiful and important group of plants, with subtle blue-green foliage, fascinating stem and leaf architecture, and long-lasting pastel blooms that nourish many species of insects and birds. The nectar they produce is utilized by many species of bees, wasps, butterflies, moths, flies, beetles, spiders, katydids, and hummingbirds, which demonstrates the wide diversity of animals supported by native thistle flowers. In late summer and early fall, they are an essential nectar source for migrating Monarch butterflies. Their persistent seed heads provide the favorite food of goldfinches (both Lesser and American) and other songbirds such as the Carolina Chickadee, and the silky fluff attached to mature seeds is used to line their nests in the spring.

While there are many plants with spines that are erroneously called 'thistles', true thistles belong to the genus *Cirsium*. Of the 62 native species in North America, the most important species in our area are the Texas Thistle (*Cirsium texanum*) and the Yellow Thistle (*Cirsium horridulum*). The Texas Thistle, also called Southern Thistle or Gray Woolly Twintip, is an upright, unbranched or sparingly branched plant, 2 to 6.5 feet tall, with

grayish-green foliage that is spiny and woolly-white below. Violet-pink to deep lavender-rose composite flower heads top the stems from April to August, and are surrounded by bracts that bear a silvery strip down the middle. Texas Thistle is also the larval host plant for the Painted Lady and Mylitta Crescent butterflies. Yellow Thistle, as perhaps foreshadowed by its scientific name, has a host of other, undeserved common names such as Horrid Thistle and Terrible Thistle. It has a branching, densely hairy stem rising from a 2 foot wide basal rosette, 1 to



The blooms of the Yellow Thistle are surrounded by a whorl of spiny bracts.

5.5 feet tall, with long grayish-green spiny leaves and several large flower heads. Blooming May to August, these composite flower heads are up to 3 inches wide, surrounded by a whorl of spiny, hairy, leaf like bracts, and are frequently red-purple, pink, or white instead of the namesake yellow. In the first year of growth this plant remains a low-lying rosette, and 'bolts' in the spring of the following year to reach its full height. Yellow Thistle is an excellent attractant for Sphinx moths and is the larval host plant for the Little Metalmark and Painted Lady butterflies.

It's time to bring back our native thistles, so this fall consider planting them in your wildscape. These species have evolved with our native pollinators in our natural habitats over thousands of years. As a result, they benefit us by helping to sustain a healthy ecoweb, protecting our water quality, sequestering carbon in our soils, and adding a sublime beauty and structure to our landscapes. And that's our epistle to the thistle!

Send your nature-related questions to naturewatch@austin.rr.com and we'll do our best to answer them. If you enjoy reading these articles, check out our books, *Nature Watch Austin* and *Nature Watch Big Bend* (both published by Texas A&M University Press), and our blog at naturewatchaustin.blogspot.com.

HEY MOM AND DAD IT'S CRAFT TIME

QUICK AND EASY PAPER BAG
TURKEY CRAFT



What you will need:

- 1 paper bag preferably lunch bag size
- 1 Pack of construction paper pick five colors (this works best with primary colors but pick whatever color you and your little want to make your turkey)
- 1 Black Sharpie or Pen
- 1 Glue stick or Glue

Here's what to do:

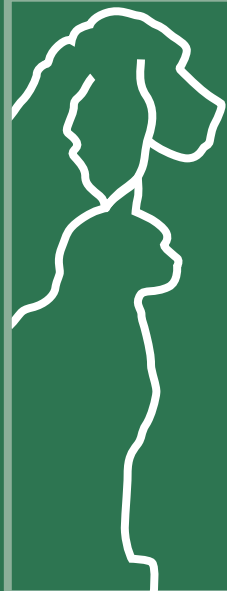
- Take the brown paper bag flip it so the fold part (or bottom) is up.
- Draw eyes the bag on the folded bottom parts center the eyes in the middle.
- Take your construction paper and cut out nine feathers make sure to make sure colors up.
- Take a piece of orange construction paper and cut out a triangle for the turkey's beak.
- Use your red construction paper and cut out a wavy waddle.
- Take your glue stick and glue down your beak right under the turkey's eyes.
- Add your wavy waddle to one side of the beak.
- Now flip over the paper bag and glue down your feathers to each side of the bag remember to alternate colors.
- Let your turkey dry for 30 to 45 minutes



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Centipedes

Centipedes have a single pair of antennae on their head and a long, worm-like body. They have one pair of legs per body segment with the first pair of legs modified to function as claws and are used to capture prey. These claws are sometimes called fangs since they are connected to poison glands that can inject venom to subdue captured prey.

Most centipedes found in Texas are relatively small, but the red headed centipede, *Scolopendra heros*, can reach over nine inches when full grown. The bite of larger species of centipedes may cause extreme discomfort and pain.

Centipedes can live from one to six years. They prefer moist, protected habitats such as under stones, rotted logs, leaves or bark. Winter is spent as an adult and eggs are laid in soil during warm months and are covered by a sticky substance.

Centipedes are predaceous with many species feeding on other arthropods, such as insects. Their modified pair of legs, or claws, is directly under the head, allowing prey to be injected with venom.

Most centipedes can only bite with their poison claws located directly under the head resulting in a bee-like sting; however, *Scolopendra* can harm a person with the sharp claws of its many walking legs. Each walking leg is tipped with a sharp claw capable of making tiny cuts in human skin. A poison produced from the attachment point of each leg may be dropped into the wounds resulting in an inflamed and irritated condition. The best rule of thumb is to never handle large centipedes.

With cooler weather, centipedes may move inside homes to avoid extreme temperatures. Tips to prevent centipedes from sharing your home:

- move objects providing harborage away from the structure such as compost piles, firewood and stones
- create a band of gravel, or similar material between the foundation of the home and any landscape beds that touch the structure
- occasionally turn mulch near structures to allow it to dry out
- seal cracks, crevices, and pipe penetrations with sealant that will expand with our temperature extremes
- repair weather stripping around doors and windows as needed
- properly ventilate crawl spaces or areas under the home to allow for air flow through the area
- use perimeter sprays around a building's foundation

For more information or help with identification, contact Wizzie Brown, Texas AgriLife Extension Service Program Specialist at 512.854.9600. Check out my blog at www.urban-ipm.blogspot.com

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