

While birding along The Ditch, I noticed that the monarchs were flocking to the white flower heads on all of the frostweed plants, busily probing the flowers for nectar. Monarch butterflies follow the Colorado, San Saba and other Texas rivers as they migrate to their wintering grounds in the highlands of northern Mexico. The fall migration takes about two months, and as they go, the monarchs drop down into the shelter of forests along the way to feed on flowers and rest overnight. In repose, they hang from the branches of pecans, frostweed and other plants.

Frostweed, *Verbesina virginica*, is truly an exceptional nectar source for butterflies. Along with the *Liatris* species, it is one of the few plants that bloom in late summer, the hottest part of the year, and continue blooming until frost. Beautiful white blooms in fall attract pollinators. Frostweed spreads by underground stems, sprouts new plants in late spring and dies back in the winter. Although larger in size than most wildflowers, frostweed is hardly noticeable until it blooms in the fall. The plants produce long, green, ribbon-like wings that run the length of the stem. This characteristic makes them easy to identify when they aren't in flower.

When you choose plants that will attract butterflies it is important to remember that there are two types of food sources that butterflies depend upon; one is a larval food source and the other is a nectar source for the adult butterfly.

Pipevine Butterflies, Monarchs and Great Purple Hairstreaks are a few of the many butterflies that love the bountiful nectar of the Frostweed. It has been selected as a monitoring plant by Monarch Watch because of its importance as a nectar source for the Monarch butterfly. The flowers form a white disc 3-6 inches across providing a mini buffet table for the butterflies.

This biennial also known as white crownbeard, ice plant, Indian tobacco, and squawweed ranges in height from 3-6 feet tall. In wet years the plants underneath the pecans along The Ditch can be 6 feet tall. Last year without any rainfall and no supplemental water this same area had Frostweed that was only 2 to 3 feet.

The stem is straight and un-branched until the flower heads appear. Frostweed has large rough leaves that are a dark green in color and Native Americans would roll them and smoke them in special ceremonies like tobacco.

The Native Americans also used different parts of the plant to ease gastrointestinal symptoms mainly as a laxative, and they also believed that it would help the urinary tract and certain eye ailments.

Frostweed is a stately robust plant and can dominate the area that it is planted in. It seems to love growing under my mature pecan trees here in San Saba and can be found growing throughout Texas in shade to part shade and in areas that are dry to moist. Its best use is in naturalized landscapes and you will be rewarded in the fall by the butterflies that will flock to it in droves.

The first frost is when Frostweed performs a unique trick that is truly a marvel of nature. The stem splits and as the sap oozes out of the winged stem it freezes and as it is freezing it curls into fascinating ribbons forming mini ice sculptures. The plant was named Frostweed because of this unique characteristic.

Consider adding Frostweed to your habitat. It is a necessary nectar source especially in drought years like we are having now.