

## Trailing Ratany

Article and photos by Ricky Linex  
Wildlife Biologist, Natural Resources Conservation Service

Imagine that you are putting the sneak on a big trophy; you kneel down to steady your shot and immediately feel a sharp prick when your knee hits the ground. While there are numerous possible culprits across the rangelands of Texas, one of the lesser suspects is a low spreading forb with many horizontal branches, trailing ratany. This plant has spiny fruit and is also known as prairie sandbur and trailing krameria. Ratany can be found across all regions of Texas with the exception of the Pineywoods. It is adapted to most soil types and can reliably be found in pastures which have not had long-term overgrazing. The flowers, leaves and branches of trailing ratany, *Krameria lanceolata*, provide excellent quality forage for deer, antelope, and all classes of livestock. This warm-season perennial has numerous large woody roots each about the size of a man's fingers. The importance of managing for the survival of perennial plants is never more obvious than it is this year. Growth of perennials might be reduced in severe drought years but the plants are available, and are providing forage for animals. Fair weather annual forbs that provide food and cover during years with normal rainfall are not present this year. The normally bright green stems and leaves of trailing ratany can reach up to 3 feet in length covering an area as large as a bushel basket. During the drought of 2011 most plants growing in full sun appeared brownish-maroon and less than 12 inches in length. Upon closer examination only the upper surfaces were brownish-maroon while the undersides of the leaves and stems were still green. In normal rainfall years some plants will develop a brownish-maroon color to the upper side of the stems during mid-summer growth; during normal rainfall years the leaves of ratany remains green during the entire growing season.

Under magnification the stems and leaves are covered with soft, flattened white hairs while the spiny fruits are covered with short, white wooly fuzz. The leaves are linear and fleshy in shape, silky-pubescent, 3/8- to 1-inch long along stalks originating from leaf axils. The underside of each leaf has a groove running the length of the leaf. Without magnification one would not notice that each leaf is tipped with a brownish sharp spine. Thankfully these spines are too small to be felt when handling the plant.

Flowers are 1-inch wide with five unequal reddish-purple sepals and five smaller, unequal petals, three of the petals fused into a fan shape with the two lower petals smaller and red with greenish edges. The fruits will remind you of a goathead or puncturevine, another plant that grows horizontally along the ground. I don't remember many episodes of running barefoot as a youngster because we did have healthy populations of both goatheads and grass burs growing in and around my hometown of Coolidge, Texas in the 1960s. The fruits of trailing ratany more closely resemble those of goatheads but rarely will ratany grow in the suburbs and alleys of small towns. The fruits have a meaty kernel under all of those spines. The hard brown shell is fairly thin and tightly holds the kernel inside. I would guess that rodents are able to cut into the spiny husk to get to the kernel. It is a proud native forb that thrives in the wide open spaces of Texas. Trailing ratany responds favorably to prescribed burns and will hopefully survive some of the extreme wild fires that have burned across Texas this year. Blooms can last from May to November but most will flower early and be setting seeds from May to July. Fruits can be carefully gathered and planted in full sunlight to spread this desirable forb across your pastures. Watch where you kneel or squat down the next time you are out enjoying our wild places. After all, isn't everything in the wilds of Texas supposed to sting, stab or bite you?

Captions:

1 Trailing Ratany forms a radial growth habit early in the growing season.



2 Trailing ratany sepals give the appearance of five unequal reddish petals on each flower.



3 Numerous spiny fruits form on each of the many stems of trailing ratany.



4 Trailing ratany produces a large amount of nutritious forage for wildlife and livestock.



5 Green up of trailing ratany occurs quickly following prescribed burns.



6 Numerous finger-sized maroon roots radiate down and outward several feet bringing up water and nutrients.

