

# Native Plants at South Texas State Fair

Sharon S. Odegar



The Texas Master Naturalists Sabine-Neches Chapter featured carnivorous plants at the South Texas State Fair.

This year the Young Men's Business League of Beaumont, which produces the South Texas State Fair, offered a large space to the Texas Master Naturalists Sabine-Neches Chapter to showcase nature and ecosystems in our area. This was a new concept the YMBL had never tried before -- a free space. YMBL wouldn't make any money from this space. It was up to the Master Naturalists to enlist other non-profit organizations to participate and encourage them to increase awareness of outdoor educational, recreational, and community opportunities available to the public. Luckily, I am a member of the Master Naturalists, as well as NPSOT, so we got an early invitation to sponsor a table. It was, thank goodness, a limited time: the last two days of the fair for one-half a day each. Thanks to the Young Men's Business League and Master Naturalists for making the opportunity possible.

A fair takes a little more creative planning than a regular plant sale. You need to create an eye-catching display at which you hand out information, entertain kids, and teach everybody something they didn't know about Native Plants. A three-ring circus! We decided to feature Texas Carnivorous Plants - no, not Venus Fly Trap, which is what everyone at the Fair knew! We thought Pitcher Plants (*Sarracenia alata*) wouldn't

be too hard to make. Roll up poster board, fix a stand. Martha Rinker took on that project and created a great bog with giant and little plants, complete with plastic bugs for the “Toss a Bug to Lunch” game. Meanwhile, Jackie Parker painted a swamp scene featuring all four carnivorous plants on a 4x8 sheet of plywood. She attached Velcro to the bug-hungry plants and supplied bugs with Velcro attached to throw at the plants. Only the bugs didn’t stick like we thought they would - they bounced off. Oh, never fear - “Pin the Bug on the Plant.” It was quickly discovered that young children who can’t really throw very well love to take bugs off of one place and put them on a hungry plant. We thought one little girl was going to stay with us. We also had bug tattoos, pictures of native plants to color, and native plant seeds to give away. A trifold board held pictures of special plants. Everyone talked without stopping and we hope enlightened our visitors about Native Plants.

A Master Naturalist, Nancy Angel, helped us locate a Bladderwort (*Utricularia radiate*), a Butterwort (*Pinguicula ionantha*) and a Sundew (*Doseera brevifolia*). So, we had three real plants to examine and see the bug-trapping hairs. The Bladderwort’s underwater leaves, bladders, and roots were quite strange looking in a clear vase and



The exhibit included plants with bug trapping hairs like this Bladderwort (*Utricularia radiate*).

caught everyone's attention more than the cute little yellow flowers. When people heard the plants ate mosquito larva, they would have paid anything to get one for their pond!

The Champions for Nature Exhibit included 14 collaborating organizations. More than 2,000 visitors passed through and spent time at the exhibits over the two days. Collaborators included Big Thicket National Preserve, the Big Thicket Association, Village Creek State Park, Sea Rim State Park, Texas Forestry Service, Big Thicket National Heritage Trust, Texas Game Wardens, and the Golden Triangle Sierra Club among others.

Once you have all of the wonderful plants to exhibit and the games to play, you just have to go do this some more. So the Beaumont Chapter followed the South Texas State Fair three weeks later by participating in EcoFest at Shangri La Botanical Gardens and Nature Center in Orange. Then, two weeks later at the Annual Maypole Festival in the Beaumont Botanical Gardens, we welcomed visitors with an information table and a concoction of children's activities to help entertain families and help create a festive atmosphere. All the while peddling information about our Native Plants!

## Public Outreach

*Meg Inglis, Executive Director*

A couple of months ago I was contacted by PBS News Hour digital with questions about native plants and “xeriscaping” to save water - what an educational outreach opportunity that was. The journalist had posted a “call out” on social media, and the 2nd greatest number of responses came from Texans! Thanks to the enthusiastic response of our Native Plant Society of Texas members, the journalist contacted the Society and we had a chance to speak with him for an hour and send him tons of information.

Many of us have participated in pod casts and interviews, presentations and outreach. And, as a result, the public is becoming more aware of environmental issues such as the impacts of climate change, the effects of increased development and the degradation of our ecosystems. People are beginning to understand the important role that native plants play in, for example, conserving water and increasing our ecosystem resilience.

As members of the Society, your role is critical in getting the message out. Thank you for being such passionate native plant promoters. Please keep up the good work and continue letting us know about it in your chapter activity reports!