

Nature Notes

...from Sharon

The Beach Bean (aka Bay Bean) may be found as runners on the ground or as climbing vines using shrubs as a trellis. Because of the freezing temperatures this past winter, many of these plants at the Preserve were killed back, so have taken a while to recover. We are finally starting to see the runners in and on top of the sea grape trees along the boardwalk. This fast-growing, sturdy vine can be found in southern coastal regions around the Gulf of Mexico, even to the Yucatan. It also occurs throughout the world in tropical and subtropical coastal locations.

It can tolerate periods of drought; however, it cannot tolerate extreme cold. It definitely likes full sun and the tropical coastal-dune environment. It sets down roots at nodes, forming networks that aid in stabilizing sands and controlling erosion. When it has a chance to become aerial, it does not hesitate to climb available shrubs or small trees. The vine can reach up to 50 feet from its origin. It is often one of the first plants to colonize newly deposited sand or disturbed coastal dunes. It has alternating oval leaves composed of three leaflets. In the early morning, the leaflets are open flat. As the sun rises higher in the sky, the leaves fold along their mid-rib to reduce their heat absorbing area.

Beach Bean or Bay Bean (*Canavalia maritima*)



This plant produces small pea-type, pink-to-purple flowers that are about 1-inch long. In some coastal areas, it may bloom year-round as long as the temperatures remain warm to moderate. This past weekend I saw some of the beautiful flowers finally starting to bloom in the Preserve—look along the north side of the most northern boardwalk. The blooms are followed by 4- to 6-inch pods that become woody when dried and have brown, marbled beans inside. This plant is in the legume family, as evidenced by the bean pods. The mature, dried beans are edible and should be boiled, pour off first water, and boiled

a second time to reduce alkaloids. “Edible” is for most people—some people may have allergies and everyone should approach eating unknown plants carefully. The immature beans are considered toxic. Unlike another plant with “leaves of three” (poison ivy which has pointed leaves), the oval leaves of the Beach Bean do not irritate skin of most people. In fact, the leaves have been used to make a paste to treat boils and skin inflammation. The vines have been used to feed livestock. The beans are now being used in medical research for treatment of cancer.



For indigenous cultures such as the Mazatecs and other tribal groups in coastal regions of southern Mexico, it was considered important and sacred enough for plants to be placed in and around grave sites. This alone indicates an importance for this plant in ritual that goes beyond decoration, since the dried leaves aren't pretty, but the aroma is very pleasing. The beans have been used in jewelry making throughout the Caribbean and Central America coastal areas.