

Call it jicamilla or Berlandier's nettlespurge

by Jim Seeden

Its scientific name is Jatropha cathartica and I suspect it's not well known by any name. I first saw one while we were evaluating a ranch which eventually



became Las Estrellas Preserve (the Star Cactus Ranch) after being purchased by The Nature Conservancy. The ranch constitutes their effort to conserve the endangered star cactus.

Every ecosystem has a specific combination of plant species. *Jatropha cathartica* is often found in ecosystems with star cacti, manfredas, Fitch's hedgehog cacti,

and horse crippler cacti, none of these are common plants, along with some typical Valley shrubs. The soils in such ecosystems are mostly clay.

Those who enjoy growing succulents find jicamillas attractive and unusual. The 8 to 10 inch flower stalks are tipped with a cluster of small, bright rose-red



flowers with five petals each. One oddity is that the individual flowers are unisexual but in each cluster will be several of each sex, usually in a ratio of about 3 male to 1 female. When pollinated the female flowers produce round, green, three seeded pods. Blooms can occur from February through November but are most common in the summer.

The leaves are a pubescent gray-green and palmately five lobed, like fingers of your hand. Each lobe is pointed and bears a jagged set of teeth.

One of its most distinctive features is a very large tuber found just below ground level. Those who grow them for display sometimes plant them with the tuber above ground leaving only the lower taproot in the ground. While it elicits curiosity viewing, it seems to be a bizarre practice to me. I grow one with the tuber almost entirely underground and it seems very happy.



The plants are perennial but go dormant in the winter and lose all their stems and leaves.

I should warn you that, while it's called jicamilla and has a large tuber, it should not be confused with jicama which is found in grocery stores. They're not even in the same genus. Jicamilla is NOT edible. It's a member of the spurge family.

I close by noting that *Jatropha cathartica* is another species endemic to Texas and a northern portion of Mexico. The Valley does contain an amazing diversity of wild things!