

A Passion for Passionvines... and their butterflies, of course!



The most spectacular of the Texas passionflowers, Maypop, *Passiflora incarnata*, can be seen along fencerows around town.

The *Passiflora*, more commonly known as the passionflowers or passionvines, have the most unusual flowers in the world, bar none, and play host to the most intriguing group of butterflies that I know. Now

everyone reading this knows my love of butterflies (in fact, it's infamous), but even if I had never seen a single butterfly in my life, I would love the wonderfully spectacular and uniquely strange flowers of the passion vines—there's

simply nothing else like them in the world!

That one spectacular group of butterflies, the *Heliconius* or the passionflower or passionvine butterflies (Wow! Bet you never saw that coming, eh?), have caterpillars that will feed on them and nothing but them readily explains—to anyone who knows me—how I developed my passion for passionvines! Passionflowers, and their butterflies, are almost exclusively tropical and I thought I'd have to learn a new language and move to the tropics to study them but thankfully they both occur here in Texas (where, also thankfully, the natives appear to speak an understandable variation of the Queen's English).

Texas is blessed with eight species of passionvines, although three of them don't occur naturally outside of the LRGV and areas along the Coastal Bend and two others are almost exclusively known from West Texas and the Hill Country, and three common species of passionvine butterflies. The number of passionvine butterflies spikes up to at least six down there, with at least eight being known from Texas, but 'round these parts, three of each is about the best that you'll see.

The caterpillars of the common Gulf Fritillary, *Agraulis vanillae*,

will feed on all of the species of passionvines in Texas (might explain why it's common, eh?). The other two are a bit more catholic in their tastes. The Zebra Longwing, *Heliconius charithonia*—my personal favorite, favors the Yellow Passionflower, *Passiflora lutea*, which is quite common around Bastrop Co., but will also use the beautiful Maypop, *Passiflora incarnata*, somewhat less common around here but always a joy to find.

The Julia, *Dryas julia*, also likes the local Yellow Passionflower but much prefers the two Hill Country/West Texas species, the Bracted Passionflower, *P. affinis*, and the Birdwing Passionflower, *P. tenuiloba*. The third passionflower species—though only the Gulf Fritillary (and me!) likes this one—that is most likely to be encountered in Bastrop Co. is a naturalized alien (like me!) that is the most variable passionflower species in the world, the Fetid (or Cottonleaf) Passionflower, *P. foetida*.

If you'd like to learn more about these enigmatic plants then come to the September meeting of the Lost Pines Chapter of the Native Plant Society of Texas next Tuesday night and I'll tell you everything you could possibly want to know (but were afraid to ask).