



Through the Eyes of a Botanist

By Molly McCormick

The abundance of life in the grasslands during monsoon season is such a treat! Come with me as I take a deeper look. Imagine we are walking around in the green abundance, hoping to avoid chiggers and looking for flowering plants.

We are among the tall, slender side-oats grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*), with its bowing seed heads. Sprangletop (*Leptichloa dubia*) is there, with seed heads that seem to leap up and shoot in all directions like a team of acro-

bats. We are looking for a unique flowering herb, lemon beebalm, or, as botanists call it, *Monarda citriodora* var. *austromontana*, which means the lemon-smelling plant of the southern mountains. Other people call it Mexican oregano. It is in the mint family.

As we walk, listening to the buzzing of pollinators, a fragrant aroma wafts by. Ah, there it is, lemon beebalm, a patch of white emerging from the grass. Pluck a leaf from one of a few square stems emerging from the ground. Rub it between your fingers, and let the spicy aroma fill your senses.

The flowers rise from the grassland like miniature

worlds perched on platforms of long slender leaves, whorled around the stem, sending out rings of tiny lavender to white blossoms. The flowers are two-lipped; the lower petals are fused together, creating a landing pad for pollinating insects. The upper petals are like an awning, protecting the reproductive parts of the flower. Nectar is produced deep within the neck of the flower. This design is the result of co-evolution with floral visitors: the struggle to reproduce, to spread pollen, without using too many resources.

Remember the buzzing pollinators you heard earlier in the walk? Let's take a look around and notice who else is visiting *monarda*. We probably will spot one of the 500 or so native bees that visit these grasslands. The bees may be perched on the fused

lower petals while crawling inside to sip nectar. Watch as the long stamens reach over the bee and shake pollen onto its unsuspecting little back. Now watch to see if it flies off to the next flower cluster to deposit some of that pollen.

If everything works out, it won't be long until the fragrant worlds are filled with seeds. The seeds will disperse to be eaten by various creatures or to germinate into more of this lemon beebalm of the southern mountains, which will support next season's pollinator frenzy. Now go investigate that patch of red flowers by the oak tree

To find out more about native plants, check out events at BorderlandsRestoration.org.

Molly McCormick is the Restoration Project Manager/Outreach Specialist for Borderlands Restoration.

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