

Man risks skin on Texas walks

Every time a man or animal takes a walk in rural Texas he is faced with the prospect of being stabbed by hundreds of glass syringes produced by nature and filled with poison.

These "plant stinging hairs" or nettles are being studied by TAMU biologist Dr. E. Laurence Thurston, with the aid of an electron microscope, to discover how the plant cells incorporate silica out of the soil to form glass walls in the hairs which then function as hypodermic needles.

"Nettles have their place in history," Thurston added. "Country folks used to make a tea that was used to cure practically all ills, and when Caesar's Roman army was encamped and freezing in the chill of Britain the soldiers rubbed nettle leaves on their legs making them burn for the rest of the day."

"But, Texas is unique in that it possesses representatives of all four major plant families with such unique defense mechanisms," he added. "The native plants are commonly called the 'stinging nettle, Texas bull nettle, burning bush and nose burn.'" They are known to cause effects ranging from various types of skin irritations in humans to, in certain rare instances, death in dogs and cattle.

"These elaborate plant devices appear to aid in the protection of these plant species from consumption by animal," Thurston pointed out. "Plant stinging hairs do not merely impale their victims like a thorn, but possess specialized glass tips capable of penetrating the skin of an individual coming in contact with one. In addition to the physical wound produced by the penetration of the stinging hair, a toxic poison is released into the wound compounding the effect. The common nettle (Urtica) was believed to possess formic acid as its poison. However, research has shown that the "toxin" is a group of complex substances.

"Tragia or 'nose burn,' which is native to West Texas, produces small stinging hairs measuring only 1/1250 inch in length. These structures are quite bizarre in that they possess a sharp crystal which first penetrates the skin causing the initial puncture wound. The toxin is then conveyed from the stinging cell into the wound via a specialized groove in the crystal."

"This is the only university in Texas that has an electron microscope with the capabilities of chemically analyzing very small regions within individual cells," added Thurston. "The electron microscopes provide us with a special insight unavailable to previous investigators."

"Now," he commented, "we are trying to discover how the plant cell walls incorporate silica and build glass walls which form the hypodermic syringes when brushed against. We found out if you remove the source of silica the nettle becomes as limp as a noodle. So our task is to answer the basic biological question of how the cells produce the specialized compounds to make them rigid," concluded Thurston, who is also director of the Electron Microscopy Center.

Election views

(Continued from page 1)
around freely:
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"I see all these people cramming, and what do they know?"
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