

This past weekend, Rita and I hit the trail, the *Cowboy Trail* that is. Actually, we were physically on the trail for only a brief moment to take pictures. Prior to stopping and photographing, we were driving from Tilden, Nebraska, to Battle Creek, Nebraska. In this area, U.S. Highway 275 closely parallels the famous *Cowboy Trail*. That day while driving we noticed a beautiful blooming, vining plant that draped many of the trees and shrubs along the trail. So striking was it that we were compelled to stop and take a closer look. After closely examining this plant, I quickly realized it is deemed a weed in my book ***Weeds of Nebraska and the Central Plains***, and it is closely related to and resembles a similar weed we have growing here in Central Nebraska.



Before I acquaint you with this beautiful weed, allow me to briefly familiarize you with the *Cowboy Trail* and why we were there.

---



In 1994 the State of Nebraska accepted a donation from the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy establishing a recreation and nature trail crossing the northern tier of Nebraska along the abandoned right-of-way of the historic Chicago and Northwestern Railroad. The trail, called the *Cowboy Trail*, is used only for hiking, biking and horseback; it allows no motorized vehicles. This 195-mile-long trail runs from Norfolk, Nebraska, to Valentine, Nebraska, passing through more than twenty towns and villages including Tilden and Battle Creek.

My wife Rita is originally from Tilden. Her parents continue to reside in the area. Within the past six months, her 97-year-old mother was admitted to the care home in Battle Creek while her father resides in Tilden's assisted living facility. Nearly every two weeks, Rita and I have been making the trek to Northeast Nebraska to pay each of them a visit, finding ourselves traveling alongside the *Cowboy Trail*.

Now, back to the beautiful weed. It is scientifically known as *Echinocystis lobate*, more commonly called wild cucumber. Having done a little research on this weed, I discovered it is almost the same as a vining weed we have growing here in Central Nebraska called the bur-cucumber plant.

As stated before, when in bloom, wild cucumber vine is attractive. Some people consider it worthy of ornamental status. Wild cucumber is not invasive but considered an aggressive, pesky weed. It grows more rampant during wet years. Although indigenous to the entire state of Nebraska, it is found most abundantly in the eastern part of the state. It is widely adapted to grow in moist soils along stream banks,



wooded areas, fence rows, roadside ditches, and sometimes it is found growing in cultivated fields. Although it is not considered a serious weed problem in cultivated fields, it can become a nuisance. It is a rigorous climber capable of covering ornamental trees and shrubs and occasionally covering corn and soybeans.

Wild cucumber is an annual vine with five triangular, deeply-lobed leaves. When in bloom, its beautiful greenish-white staminate flowers

cover the vine ultimately giving rise to oval-shaped, prickly seed pods one to two inches in length. Wild cucumber plants climb by wrapping their tendrils around anything in their path.

The vines can easily grow more than 25 feet long, blocking out the sunlight for other plants.

Fortunately, this annual weed dies with the first hard frost.

Round-up (glyphosate) and/or 2-4-D are systemic post-emergent herbicides. Either will generally kill the plant but have no effect on the seeds in the ground.

Wild cucumber seeds can remain dormant in the soil for a long time. In any one year, only five to ten percent of the seeds germinate, making consistent long-term control nearly impossible. Although pre-emergent herbicides will help, I read where it said, "Once you have this weed, it will be there for your lifetime and maybe your children's lifetimes."



I don't know if that is true, but I do know wild cucumber is persistent in coming back year after year. As with most weeds, cultural controls include hand weeding and repeated cultivation.

The only good use or value that I found regarding this native weed-vine is the quality cover it provides for upland game, songbirds, and other wildlife.

Soon we will again be traveling beside the *Cowboy Trail*. Who knows what other interesting plants we may see!