

## Proceed with caution when nurturing mystery plants

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I accumulated a few one-gallon pots of upstart plants from the yard in late spring and stashed them under the arbor in a make-shift nursery. There were no more plant sales slated; several of the plants were naturalized, rather than native, but a mantra goes through my head sometimes, “no plant left behind,” and I end up babysitting stray plants.

One plant in the little nursery dried up. Out of laziness, I didn’t remove the pot of soil, so it continued to get watered. In June, a cotyledon pushed through the soil near the edge of the pot, and I kept it in the nursery, periodically trying to identify the burgeoning specimen via iNaturalist.org.

Even with a good head of feathery branches on the plant, I didn’t trust the answer I was getting because I was completely unfamiliar with their selection, and I couldn’t fathom how I could have come across a seed of such, although the identifications were consistent.

My preliminary research of the suspected species indicated the plant could eventually turn out tree-like, required a moist environment and could grow to 10 feet tall, which made me cautious about planting it in the yard anywhere just to see what it would become.

Finally, the first week of August showed a bud nearly in bloom and the next day, several blooms had opened around the upper stalk of the now four-foot-tall plant, still in its gallon pot of soil. No question about it, the plant identification in iNaturalist.org confirmed the plant as **bigpod sesbania** (*Sesbania herbacea*).

I got serious with researching the plant. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s plants database, bigpod sesbania is a cover crop/green manure, grown mainly for use as a soil-improving crop. It is an erect, large, semi-woody, herbaceous perennial that can reach heights of three to 10 feet. I’ve not noticed any farm fields with such a crop in my area.



Bigpod sesbania (*Sesbania herbacea*) seedling

Other common names are Colorado River-hemp, tall river-hemp and coffeeweed, a flowering plant in the legume family, native to the United States, particularly the southeastern states, where it grows in moist environments. Elsewhere, it is an introduced species.

Nine other Rio Grande Valley observations have been uploaded to iNaturalist, showing the plant to be speckled around Hidalgo and Cameron counties, mostly documented since 2020; one entry showed documentation in 2015 in the Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge, La Sal Del Rey.

The flowers are typical pea-like blooms, bell-shaped, yellow to yellowish orange with purple spots or streaks; mine are solid yellow as yet. It reproduces by seed. The seedpod also is typical



pea family, four to eight inches long, smooth, jointed, four-sided, tipped with a small beak and containing 30-40 seeds that are mottled with orange, green or brown colors, which I'm curious to see.

I'll keep a strict watch, especially once it produces seed pods. I don't need a forest of tall, woody, perennials that require plowing under getting out of hand, and I doubt the farm field adjacent to our property needs any volunteer soil improvements.

Yellow, pea-like blossoms of bigpod sesbania