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RIO DELTA WILD

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large PHOTO CAPTION:

“Woody seedpods and fragrant white puffballs decorate Guajillo.”



FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Acacia berlandieri*

Common Names: Guajillo

Family: Fabaceae (Legume)

Guajillo Blooms First in Spring

In January, Guajillo has begun to bloom in Valley Nature Center’s courtyard entry to the nature park. These creamy white and fragrant puffballs illustrate the “globose” character of Acacia blooms. In this area, Guajillo’s blooms appear earlier than the yellow blooms of Huisache, though Huisache is more commonly recognized as the local harbinger of spring.

At first glance, one might mistake Guajillo for a short, multi-trunked and highly-branched Tepeguaje. Several other differences are obvious. Both have long, flat seedpods. Those of Guajillo are woody, velvety and often contorted. Many Guajillo specimens bear thorns, while Tepeguaje does not. Ferny foliage and puffball blossoms demonstrate a close genetic relationship between them.

One would not select Guajillo as first choice for human shade. Adult trees rarely grow taller than 12 feet. Branches typically grow in a fashion which protects small wildlife by fencing out larger creatures. Aggressive pruning is required to train Guajillo into a small specimen tree.

Correll & Johnston describe the natural occurrence of Guajillo: “Exceedingly abundant on limestone ridges and caliche cuevas in the Rio Grande Plains and northwest to east Brewster County in the Trans-Pecos and southern part of Edwards Plateau, rare in deeper soils of Rio Grande Valley and delta ... Texas to Queretaro, San Luis Potosi and Hidalgo.” (*Vascular Plants of Texas*, 1979.) The typical range is below 3000 feet of elevation.

Although Guajillo does not occur in the Arizona desert, one of the most informative web pages I found for the plant was that of an Arizona wholesale nursery. As the adage goes, “the grass is always greener on the other side.” Arizona folks just love our south Texas Guajillo, while many Texans are busy bulldozing it in the name of progress.

The Arizona nursery provides this precaution: “Young Guajillo plants will probably need to be screened from wildlife damage for the first several years, at least until the trunks are large enough not to be eaten by rabbits.”

At the Valley Nature Center, the courtyard where Guajillo grows is one of the few places where rabbits are not in over-abundance. That could explain Martin Hagne’s comments about seedling germination. “They are rather prolific here in the court yard. We normally have a

“carpet” of baby Guajillo about a foot tall most of the year. I guess they seed easily. But they seem to “shade out” from the dark cover of the (parent) after awhile. I guess they need the sun to thrive well.” On the other hand, perhaps the rabbits are eventually sneaking in!

Guajillo is utilized by a wide range of wild creatures.

“The nectar is used by bees to make a light, sweet honey. The leaves and seeds are used by cattle, sheep, goats, and deer. At high concentrations, Guajillo can be toxic to domestic livestock. The leaves contain excitatory amine compounds that cause “Guajillo wobbles” in sheep and goats. The signs of Guajillo poisoning include uncoordinated legs, downed animals with normal appetite, and death.” (from the website of Uvalde Research and Extension Center, Texas A&M)

Recent research on goats at Texas A&M Uvalde indicates that consumption of Guajillo can affect male reproductive ability by influencing sperm production and epididymal storage capacity. Sympathomimetic properties of phenolic amines are likely involved.

Benny Simpson's Native Shrubs is another website with excellent information of this plant: “Guajillo is famed for the delicious sweet honey made from its fragrant flowers. Normally a multi-trunked large shrub, it can be pruned to a small specimen tree. With its fern-like, lacy foliage, its open, airy, rounded form, and its creamy white spring flowers, Guajillo is a desirable ornamental, useful as a hedge or fragrant specimen plant around pools or patios. It is native to dry limestone hillsides in South Central and Near-West Texas, but is adaptable to many soil types as long as they are well drained. It prefers full sun, is drought tolerant once established, and is hardy to around 20 degrees F. Although Guajillo does have thorns, they are small and not rigid and do not pose the menace of the thorns of other acacias.”

Guajillo has a wide range of common names, which I find confusing rather than helpful. For the sake of completeness, here they are: Thornless Catclaw, Mimosa Catclaw, Round-flowered Catclaw, Huajilla, Matoral, Berlandier Acacia.

“Thornless Catclaw” seems especially unhelpful. If something is thornless, how can it have cat claws?

I’ve not encountered Guajillo in the Arroyo Colorado brush, but we are planting it at Ramsey Nature Park. All that trash beneath the surface of the old landfill supplies lots of drainage and conditions there are often xeric, so the planting site seems appropriate.

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