

Christina Mild
RIO DELTA WILD



FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name:

Citharexylum berlandieri

Common Names:

Fiddlewood, Negrito

Family: Verbenaceae

Thornless Negrito Is Excellent Shrub

Negrito is an excellent shrub for residential landscaping, as it is completely without thorns. Leaves are atypically large for a LRGV native plant, with soft undersides.

Once established in well-drained soil,

this shrub is a rapid grower.

Negrito is an example of a native plant which is rare to infrequent in the wild, yet successfully propagated and grown in LRGV landscapes.

It naturally occurs from Hidalgo to Willacy and Cameron counties and in northern Mexico. The national chains don't sell plants with such a narrow range of distribution. You'll need to buy this plant from a local, native plant nursery.

Flowering typically occurs from February through August. With frequent watering one sees frequent flowering and ample fruit.

Mockingbirds guard my plants, as they adore the berries. The ripe black fruit of *Citharexylum berlandieri* is small, juicy and tasty like a date. The common name "Negrito" brings to mind these berry clusters, pumpkin-orange ripening to black. I find no reference to their edibility. It was Frank Gonzales who mentioned eating them. The taste reminds me of a date. Frank grew up along the Arroyo Colorado and is a professional grower/landscaper. He has planted Negrito in several very public places, where they can be appreciated. Two of those places are the Valley Morning Star and Stuart Place Country Club.

Some references mention use of Negrito in Mexico as a cold remedy, but I've found no specifics regarding which plant parts are employed. I assume that fresh-picked fruit is high in vitamin C and other beneficial nutrients.

Benito Trevino of Rio Grande City passes on sage wisdom about eating fruit to which you're unaccustomed: just sample, don't feast. You're likely to get indigestion from over-indulgence in unfamiliar fruits.

Seed inside a Negrito fruit is uniquely split, like a cloven hoof.

Mike Heep has long been landscaping valley yards with this plant, also known as "fiddlewood."

Fiddles are made from relatives of Negrito. Heep employs it as a shrub or hedge. The inch-long soft leaves develop an orange tint in times of drought, and the plant is totally and absolutely without thorns.

The berry clusters are strikingly beautiful. In the hottest, drought-stricken depth of summer, the roads



leading to Laguna Atascosa are majestically lined with berry-laden fiddlewood. The plant can be monoecious (one sex or the other, not both) because some plants bear no fruit.

It is wise to plant several to encourage fruiting. In my yard, for example, a specimen which doesn't bear fruit grows adjacent to another which is currently fruit-laden.

Citharexylum berlandieri is a striking component of the attractively-landscaped "Warbler Rest-Stops" one may visit at South Padre Island's Convention Center. This community project provides water, food and shelter for migrating and resident warblers and butterflies. The Convention Center plantings are an excellent example of how we can provide for wildlife by choosing our landscape plants well.

Another fiddlewood grouping is easily seen in the vicinity of the Sabal Palms fronting Hugh Ramsey Nature Park. This planting illustrates Negrito's ability to withstand the elements, as water was sparingly and sporadically provided after initial planting.

This year my Fiddlewoods have really taken off. This is probably due to substantial rainfall. They're proving an excellent choice for our high arroyo bank, recommended for that purpose by Mike Heep.

Negrito is infrequent to rare in palm groves, clay dunes, thickets, flats, hillsides and semi-desert roadsides of Hidalgo to Willacy and Cameron counties and northern Mexico. Its fragrant, small white flower clusters are borne almost throughout summer on short, axillary twigs. Growth is fast in full sun and partial shade is survived. Clay soil is tolerated, as are medium drainage and medium amounts of water. Little maintenance is needed. The shrubs may be pruned or allowed to grow to their maximum height of 27 feet. Older trees develop an interesting, gnarled appearance.

The plant is known by many names: Orcajuela, Orcujuela, Revienta-Cabra, Encorba Gallina, Sauco Hediondo, Tamaulipan Fiddlewood, and Berlandier's Fiddlewood.

To add to the confusion of this name-profusion, closely-related plants which look nothing like Negrito are also called Fiddlewood of various and sundry types. Boxthorn Fiddlewood is found in Webb and Zapata counties and Mission Fiddlewood in Hidalgo and Starr counties.

It is likely that the buckeye butterfly can utilize Negrito, a member of the Verbena family, as a larval host plant. Many "nectarers" enjoy the creamy flowers.

There is currently no "champion" *Citharexylum berlandieri* for the state of Texas. If you have a large old specimen growing on your property, it could be a state champ.



Technical assistance by Mike Heep, native plant nurseryman and UTPA Instructor.

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