



Christina Mild
RIO DELTA WILD

“Brasil is well-suited to summer’s heat and tight landscapes.”

FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Condalia hookeri*

Common Names: Brasil, Capul Negro, Capulin

Family: Rhamnaceae (Buckthorn)

Brasil Attracts Abundant Birds

Brasil grows at Hidalgo County Historical Museum in Edinburg. A wide array of native plants adorns their courtyard and side entry, thus I return periodically to snack, photograph and collect seed. On August 9th, *brasil* which lines the side entry was loaded with small but tasty fruit.

I’ve made the unfortunate choice of featuring an area roped off for construction. Perhaps there is a similar place in the valley, but not that I’m aware of. An array of native shrubs has been planted to flank two sides and the median of a rather narrow drive between two brick buildings. Drip irrigation delivers efficient watering. The plants are glorious. There is always something in fruit or bloom. Birds and butterflies are always about.

There are many small spaces of this type throughout the valley. Few of them provide such food and shelter for wildlife and few are as attractive as this spot.

Few wild creatures reside on Edinburg’s Courthouse Square, so humans have a fighting chance of finding fruit there before it is devoured. Drip irrigation adds greatly to the fruit-bearing potential of these “in-town” plants compared with cousins growing in the wild.

Once you’ve tasted *Capul negro*, it may be hard to pass without stopping for a treat. Native nurseryman and landscaper Benito Trevino of Mission describes his method of harvesting *brasil* for propagation: one handful to the bucket, one handful to the mouth, another to the bucket, two or three handfuls to the mouth...

For those inclined to cook wild berries into jams and pies, I recommend Delena Tull’s excellent publication: *Edible & Useful Plants of Texas and the Southwest*, 1987.

Children are keenly interested in wild berries. Few of them have any clue about what is edible and what is not.

One young scout whom I escorted on a nature tour was horrified to see his dad pluck *capul negro* and pop the fruit into his mouth. “What if that’s poisonous?” the young scout protested.

“I always eat *brasil*, *ejo*. It grows beside our doorway,” answered his dad.

Becoming brave enough to feast, the son agreed, “It’s great!”

Birds also love the tiny fruit of this splendid lime-green shrub.

One cannot assume that berries loved by birds are safe for human feasting. A similar berry adorning the museum environs is *coyotillo*, adored by chachalaca and coyote. This berry is somewhat blacker and usually larger than *brasil*.

Humans who are fool enough to eat *coyotillo* suffer irreversible destruction to nerve-endings. (Their moving parts won't move.) Not long ago, Dr. Terry Fuller of San Benito cared for a patient who had consumed these berries.

Researchers are uncertain whether the fruit or only the seed of *coyotillo* holds the poison, and humans have been reluctant to volunteer for experimentation. *Coyotillo* leaves are larger than those of *brasil* and noticeably-veined. *Brasil* leaves are small and lime-green. Note well these differences, all ye who would sample purple-black fruit. A local vine which produces similar berries is possum grape, with succulent, aromatic leaves reminiscent of burning automobile tires. Eating possum grapes won't hurt you unless a crazed possum is nearby.

Brasil is multi-branched and can be trimmed into a most attractive shrub. One friend recommends it as a hedgerow. Another extols the color-contrast of lime-green *brasil* against the richer dark-green of ebony, viewed against the blue of Texas sky.

Each branch tip of *brasil* is armed with a soft thorn, making the shrub desirable for nesting birds.

Plants, of course, will not grow fast enough to please us. Then, without warning, they bolt beyond our pruning reach to scrape the roof or threaten power lines. *Brasil* is a good planting choice beneath power lines and eaves. Trimming accentuates its beauty, encouraging full and luxuriant growth.

Brasil is in the Buckthorn Family. A shrub or small tree, its native distribution includes dry soils of West, Central, and South Texas below 2000 feet, and Mexico.



Propagated from fresh or stratified seed, it is adaptable to various soil types, but prefers good drainage. Inconspicuous greenish flowers appear after rain. The pollen serves as bee food. Fruit ripens from spring through fall and is eaten by coyotes, squirrels, raccoons, gray fox, opossums and most birds. The leaves are browsed by deer. *Brasil* thickets provide cover for many mammals and birds. The thorn-tipped, delicate branches deter a climbing cat or squirrel, in search of nestlings or an egg. The hard, dense, attractive wood is close-grained, a light red with yellow sapwood. The wood yields a blue dye.

Brasil grows readily from seed and is available at many local nurseries. Most often the plant's name is anglicized as "brazil."

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

Mrs. Mild holds a Masters degree in Biological Sciences.
She may be contacted at RioDeltaWild@aol.com.
Website: www.riodeltawild.com.