



Christina Mild
RIO DELTA WILD

“Frisly blooms of Barbados Cherry lend the common name Wild Crepe Myrtle.”

FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Malpighia glabra*

Common Names: Barbados Cherry, Wild Crepe Myrtle, Acerola

Family: Malpighiaceae

Barbados Cherry is Beautifully Versatile

Barbados Cherry responded beautifully to October rains on the Rio Grande Delta, and I became aware from abundant blooms that this shrub is a major component of Arroyo Colorado Brush. In late October, flowers remain on many. Many are also loaded down

with small, green fruit, and some bear ripened red “cherries.” Wherever I pause to photograph ripe fruit, Kiskadees are very noisy, perhaps guarding their intended lunch.

A beautiful Barbados Cherry hedge was a yearly stop on Liz DeLuna’s annual Native Plant Landscaping tours during the RGV Birding Festival. I’m helping on those tours this year, but we may not be able to find that old hedge; I hear it’s been chopped down.

In any case, Barbados Cherry makes a lovely short or tall hedge, responding well to pruning or the lack of same.

Folks are sometimes dismayed when the plant they purchased for a specimen shrub develops a low, spreading habit. There are definite varieties of this plant, differing as to growth form, and it’s hard to predict which of these the adult plant will become. Many old neighborhoods, where lawns have been created by periodic mowing of native vegetation, have spreading mats of Barbados Cherry as a groundcover.

For what it matters to anyone, Barbados Cherry, *Malpighia glabra*, is listed on the Global Compendium of Weeds. There’s no explanation for why it’s included there, so I choose to ignore it as inadequately scrutinized data.

Texas A&M University website praises Barbados Cherry for planting in south Texas: “Evergreen thornless native, butterfly-attracting perennial shrub, blooming spring thru fall, very high heat tolerance, tolerates some salt in soil, low water requirements. Ht. 5 ft. ...tolerates partial sun.”

Mike Quinn includes this native on his list of recommended plants for butterfly gardens. A number of butterflies utilize the leaves as a source of larval food: White-patched and Brown-banded Skippers and Cassius Blue. Thus, if your plant appears to be eaten up, you might expect a coming generation of gossamer wings within the garden.

Barbados Cherry tastes nothing like cherries. The fruit is rather bland. It is, however, incredibly high in vitamin C. There is a long history of controversy about vitamins derived from

natural sources, like a living plant, and those synthesized in a laboratory. “Natural” forms of Vitamin C are used to treat a whole range of maladies, and Barbados Cherry is a good source of it.

For several years, I’ve been confused about the wild Barbados Cherry one encounters in the LRGV and commercially-grown “Acerola” one finds advertised on Vitamin C bottles. Both plants are often identified as *Malpighia glabra* in printed sources, compounding the confusion.

Purdue University’s Center for New Crops & Plant Products has an excellent website, containing just the information needed to straighten things out: “The Barbados cherry, a member of the Malpighiaceae, is an interesting example of a fruit that rose, like Cinderella, from relative obscurity about 40 years ago. It was at that time the subject of much taxonomic confusion, having been described and discussed previously under the binomial *Malpighia glabra* L., which properly belongs to a wild relative inhabiting the West Indies, tropical America and the lowlands of Mexico to southern Texas, and having smaller, pointed leaves, smaller flowers in peduncled umbels, styles nearly equal, and smaller fruits. *M. Punicifolia* L. (*M. glabra* Millsp. NOT Linn.) has been generally approved as the correct botanical name for the Barbados cherry, which is also called West Indian cherry...”

Bill MacWhorter, in Weslaco, grows both the native Barbados Cherry and the commercially-cultivated *Malpighia punicifolia*. The differences between them, pointed out in the previous paragraph, can be readily seen in his yard. It’s tricky to see the differences in the fruit, as birds snatch them from his bushes almost before they ripen.

Barbados Cherry is an especially good choice for gardens where small children roam. While the fruit is rather tasteless, it appears to be safe, and is probably quite high in vitamin C content. A number of pretty fruit-eating birds will also be attracted to the cherry-red fruit.

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