

Christina Mild
RIO DELTA WILD



“Fascicled leaves of Elbowbush grow in bunches from nodes on the stem.”

FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Forestiera angustifolia*

Common Names: Elbowbush, Panalero, Desert Olive

Family: Oleaceae

Panalero Feeds Many Creatures

During early April, I was lucky enough to wander extensively through arroyo brush, at Arroyo Park, C. B. Wood and Harlingen Thicket. Ann Vacek of Native Plant Project was able to join me on some of those adventures. A McAllen resident, she noted how lucky Harlingen folks are to have so many areas of wild brush available for visits to wild places.

Wildflowers and blooming cactus held my attention during those April forays, but ample fruit almost everywhere was something I could not ignore.

The tiny blue-black fruit of *Forestiera angustifolia* surrounded our fieldtrip group at Harlingen Thicket on April 15, reminding us of silent insect swarms. Such enormous amounts of fruit seemed almost like an infestation.

Mike Heep assured me, “The fruit won’t be there for long. Coyotes will gorge on it. Birds will feast on it. And fruit which falls to the ground will be consumed or hauled away by other critters.”

These “Desert Olives” are inedibly bitter, but probably aren’t poisonous. Why I licked my finger after picking these fruits I can’t recall. I did a lot of spitting afterward and have continued to live henceforth for several years.

Taylor, Rutledge and Herrera give this detailed account of how wildlife utilize Desert Olive: “White-tailed deer and livestock browse the foliage and the fruit is eaten by many mammals, such as raccoons, foxes, ringtails, rabbits, ground squirrels, rats and mice, and by many birds, such as bobwhite and scaled quail, white-winged doves and numerous songbirds. The plant offers some canopy cover from predators and is an important source of food for bees.” (Common South Texas Shrubs, 1994.)

Elbowbush refers to 90-degree angles formed by delicate and multi-branching stems. The leaves are tiny, as you'd expect from a plant suited to "desert" conditions. *Forestiera angustifolia*, the scientific name, refers to the botanist who first named the plant and to the narrow, linear leaves.

You'd hardly notice Elbowbush amongst other shrubs were it not covered with fruit. The small leaves and delicate branching blends into other brush almost invisibly. When fruit is so abundant, one notices that this thornless shrub makes up a large proportion of arroyo brush vegetation. What you notice is only half the population, as male shrubs bear no fruit!

Blooming Elbowbush attracts many kinds and large numbers of butterflies. Correll & Johnston describe the occurrence of blooms as "flowers borne in spring or often after droughts before the new leaves expand." (Manual of the Vascular Plants of Texas, 1979.)

Though many yards and businesses have no room for another tree, they may have ample space for a thornless bush or an airy hedge.

Native Nurseryman Mike Heep includes Elbowbush on his list of "RGV-Native Species with Valley-Wide Distribution." It is landscape-suitable throughout the southernmost four counties of Texas. It grows on well-drained, often rocky slopes and in brush of the Rio Grande Plains and Trans-Pecos. In addition, it occurs through much of northeastern Mexico.

The Aggie Horticulture website of Texas A&M University provides this excellent data about the plant: Evergreen, very high heat tolerance, alkaline adaptable (withstands high soil salt concentrations). A useful plant for sunny, dry sites, or windy and saline locations. (<http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu>)

A search on *Forestiera angustifolia* also leads to the website of Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Foundation, Welder Wildlife Refuge, www.southtexasnatives.org. This organization once provided excellent teacher training on flora and fauna of the South Texas brush. The website gives information on a seed-collecting project which employs youth group volunteers. The project has very good potential to preserve genetic diversity of our remaining brush, including grasses, forbs, shrubs and trees. Information on collecting, treating and storing seed is to be found on that website.



A locally-common name, Panalero, may be derived from Spanish words for honeycomb. The multi-branching growth habit may remind one of a honeycomb. When the shrub is in bloom, it's likely to be abuzz with honeybees.

One would not think of Panalero as a show-piece plant. The tiny flowers are hardly noticeable and the leaves are unremarkable. Yet the shrub has an attractive rounded form and thrives upon neglect. Panalero is airy, with usual height under nine feet and is easily pruned to assume a desired shape. Perhaps you have the perfect spot to grow this wildlife condominium/grocery combo.

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

Mrs. Mild holds an M.S. in Biol. Sci. She may be contacted at RioDeltaWild@aol.com.

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