

Christina Mild  
**RIO DELTA WILD**

### FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Koeberlinia spinosa*

Common Names: Junco, Allthorn, Crucifixion Thorn

Family: Capparaceae

### **Admiring Acute Angles of Green**

The common names of many plants reflect Christian heritage and culture. Many, in use for centuries, make reference to Easter. Crucifixion-Thorn and Corona de Cristo are common names for an attractive and especially thorny plant found in local brush.

*Koeberlinia spinosa* spells salvation for many a bird and beast seeking protection from a captor. Earlier explorers and settlers who conferred names or reverence likely sought salvation for themselves, from the thorns.

Crucifixion-Thorn is also known as Crown-of-Thorns and Allthorn. I prefer the folk name: Junco (pronounced “hoonko”).

Junco might best be described as a stiff, green, mass of tangled spines.

Each spine is about 2 inches long, green except for a dry, brown tip. Junco growing in full sun develops strong, stiff spines, which enter skin with the ease and pain of a



large hypodermic needle: brings a person right to attention. In more shaded locations, the spines are thinner and sometimes flexible.

After sufficient rain, junco grows tiny, transient, leaves. Masses of delicate greenish-white flowers are followed by tiny berries, the size of bb's, which ripen from burgundy to black.

Taylor, et. al., state that Junco is useful to animals in many ways. (*Common South Texas Shrubs*, 1994) Soft, new growth is browsed by various mammals. Quail and jackrabbits eat the fruit.

Dr. Richard Hoverson of La Feria, plant physiologist, corroborates the value of Junco to wildlife. “It was just abuzz with flies, wasps and bees,” he says of a blooming Junco he observed. “I was circling to find a dead cow,” he recalls, “believing the stench was from a carcass.” “It was Junco, in flower!”

He explains the stench as Mother Nature’s way of ensuring pollination. “You wouldn’t want to sit downwind of it on a porch,” he assured me. “I wouldn’t recommend planting it in a residential area.”

Arturo Longoria studied blooming Junco over a spring and summer. He writes of it in *Keepers of the Wilderness*, 2000. “...when it flowers, it smells of rotting flesh...” he writes. “I discovered hundreds of flies buzzing around a dark green madness of thorns...” “...the first bloom in late

March corresponds with the proliferation of flies seen every spring ... as flies wane, ...Junco finds other pollinators ... Subsequent blooms in late April and throughout May have a faintly sweet odor that attracts bees, wasps, and moths. The final pulse bloom in late summer entices minute insects; they are probably drawn to an odor, or perhaps color, indiscernible to the human nose and eyes.”

When one considers the hordes of visitors who trek to smell blooms of rare and stinky plants in famous arboreta, the possible cash value of “Junco ecotourism” comes to mind.

It would be hard to find a plant better-adapted to our hot, dry, windy conditions. The entire surface carries on photosynthesis, without the water-wasting extravagance of leaves. Stomata on the stem and spine surfaces allow transpiration, usually carried on primarily in leaves.

As you’d expect, *K. spinosa* grows in arid places. This information comes from an excellent website on Texas Shrubs (<http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/ornamentals/nativeshrubs>): “Allthorn is found in different soil types in the desert of the Trans-Pecos to the Southern Rio Grande Plains, and also New Mexico, Arizona and Mexico. .... It is very drought and cold hardy, surviving temperatures to 0 degrees F, and must be grown in full sun. Allthorn would make an unbeatable and unusual barrier hedge. The fruits are favorites of birds, and it provides excellent cover for quail and other birds and wildlife.”

Beautiful specimens of Junco grow throughout the brushy area within Harlingen’s Arroyo Park. Those which grow on the arroyo-side edges of that brush are especially large and beautiful. Seeing them requires a long trek through a maze of confusing and difficult trails or a long walk through tall grass. I choose the trails to avoid chiggers and unseen snakes, but often become exhausted before reaching my destination.

On my last visit there, many specimens were covered with black discoloration, perhaps mildew. Heep tells me that he grew a bunch of Junco at one time and webworms “ate them up a lot.”

Despite those possibilities of disease and infestation, I’d still like to see Junco grown on a dry hill as a specimen plant. The geometry is intriguing, as spines emerge from the stem in a rotating helical pattern reflected in the plant’s overall symmetry.

Junco can grow to 25 ft., though it’s more noticeable and common as a shrub. It’s found on rocky open slopes, clay mounds, brushland and about arroyos. Mike Heep finds Junco on inland lomas, but it is oddly absent on lomas very close to the coast.

Able to survive in many soils, it would seem an effective “living fence,” more permanent than those of man-made origin. To dig out junco once it is established, Dr. Hoverson says, “you’d need a backhoe.”

Unfortunately, bulldozers have brought a quick end to several *Corona de Christo plantas*, now entombed beneath concrete foundations. Perhaps they, too, will unexpectedly reappear in a different location.



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

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