

Christina Mild
RIO DELTA WILD



“Black Willow endures poor drainage.”

FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Salix nigra*

Common Names: Black Willow, Sauz

Family: Salicaceae

Black Willow and Summer Adventure

February is the best month for tree-planting in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. While the rest of the country is gripped in the clutch of winter, we experience the return of growing temperatures.

A number of organizations provide help in selecting, finding and knowing how to plant the best choice of native trees. Local growers will provide stock with the best “provenance,” genetics shaped by centuries of survival in this specific climate and geography. You can find information about native plant growers and nurseries on www.kiskadee.org in the Plants section.

Native Plant Project (NPP) (www.nativeplantproject.org) has extensive information and color photos on their website for trees native to this area, including requirements and growing habit. The same information is available as a printed booklet. Most wildlife refuges, Weslaco’s Valley Nature Center, Wild Bird Center and Grimsell’s stock the NPP’s “Native Trees” booklet.

Valley Proud Environmental Council (www.valleyproud.org) has lots of information about selecting and planting trees, as well.

At Weslaco’s Valley Nature Center and Harlingen’s Ramsey Nature Park, many tree species are labeled. It helps to look a tree over before you adopt it into the family.

The subject of today’s article is a tree which requires specific growth conditions. It isn’t unique to this area. Short-lived, fast-growing Black Willow extends throughout the lower Mississippi River Valley and bottom lands of the Gulf Coastal Plain. It has a preference for wet soils, developing best in fine silt or clay in relatively stagnant water. This ability to thrive in saturated or poorly drained soil is unique among hardwood trees.

Mike Heep tells me that Black Willow will show up most anywhere that sufficient water remains for awhile. An example he gave was the man-made lake created in Edinburg in 1986. Heep also points out the importance of discriminating between Black and Sandbar Willow. Black Willow will grow into a big tree, while Sandbar Willow will spread itself into a short thicket. Telling Willows apart is no easy thing; I’ve been in the field with experts who hemmed and hawed about an I.D.

Seed production begins when the tree reaches ten years of age. Male and female flowers are on separate plants. The flowers are on catkins, pollinated by wind or insects. Mature female catkins hold multiple cone-shaped capsules containing many small silky seeds. These silky hairs carry the seeds long distances. Germination requirements limit black willow to wet soils and full sun.

A dense root system makes Black Willow excellent for stabilizing eroding lands and it has been planted extensively for that purpose.

The long, pointed leaves of a willow and the drooping twigs make it easy to recognize, even from a distance. Full sun is an absolute requirement, no need to search around in shady spots.

You'll notice *Salix nigra* growing along a ditch as you pass Ramsey Nature Park on Loop 499. There are nice specimens at Santa Ana NWR at the edge of a pond. From Rt. 83, one notices others lining roadside ditches not far from Olmito and Hwy. 100.

The usual height is 66 feet, typically attained within 30 years. Massive trunks are usually leaning and often divided. Bark is thick, deeply divided into furrows separating thick, scaly ridges.

Anyone who grew up near a black willow knows the twigs are easily removed to make handy switches. I recommend from personal experience to steer clear of them. Branches are also woven into baskets. Derivatives of the various plant parts have been used medicinally. Extracts are reported to treat a wide range of problems, including nymphomania. Aspirin, currently purported to extend our lives via small daily doses, was derived from willow bark.

Heep is especially fond of a big old Black Willow on a resaca around Lozano. That's somewhere between San Benito and Rio Hondo. Somebody attached 2 x 4 steps up the trunk of the big tree and attached a big rope to an overhanging branch. Anyone skinnier than 160 pounds could swing out over the resaca to dive in. The place was a popular swimming hole during Heep's younger days. Sounds like lots of folks have good memories of that old tree. I hope it's still there.

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.

Return to Website: www.riodeltawild.com.