

Christina Mild
RIO DELTA WILD



“Swallowtail butterfly, Queen Butterfly nectar on Tenaza blossoms at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge.”

FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Pithecellobium pallens*

Common Names: Tenaza

Family: Legume

Tenaza Doesn't Mean Tenacious

Valley Arbor Month is a good reminder that February is the best time for planting trees.

Tenaza is a tree which can be planted almost anywhere. Dr. Richardson (*Plants of the Rio Grande Delta*, 1995) states that tenaza is often found in clay soil, a comfort for many local homeowners who have clay and nothing but.

A child could probably grow his very own tree by planting a Tenaza seed. Because it is fast-growing, the tree may outgrow the young gardener rather quickly. Every child should experience this miracle of growing something from a seed, at least once.

Many of our native species have hard-coated seeds. These germinate only after prolonged rain or mechanical injury. In contrast to these difficult-to-germinate plants, Tenaza sprouts readily.

Tenaza has nothing to do with tenacious, nor would you associate that term with the delicate appearance of this erect and airy bloomer. More properly, tenaza refers to instruments like kitchen tongs, used to grasp things. Leaflets of this nitrogen-fixing tree fold up (like tongs) under drought-stress or handling.

A mature tenaza graces the entryway to Weslaco's Public Library. The Valley Nature Center, Santa Ana NWR and Sabal Palm Grove have tenaza growing “in the wild.” This tree is also visible from Harlingen's Hike and Bike, perched along the high sand ridges of Harlingen Thicket.

Easily-understood information about Tenaza is included on the Native Plant Project's website at www.nativeplantproject.org. Sally and Andy Wasowski also feature this tree in *Native Texas Plants, Landscaping Region by Region*, Texas Monthly Press, 1988.

A small tree (growing rarely to 20 feet), tenaza occurs on “alluvial soils of stream bottoms or on edges of water holes in the Coastal Prairies and Marshes of south Texas.” (*Trees, Shrubs & Cacti of South Texas*, James H. Everitt and D. Lynn Drawe, 1993) The tree’s range extends just north of Corpus Christi and south into Mexico. If it were a bird, that would make it a “South Texas specialty.”

Not to be confused with a shade tree, tenaza has foliage which is open and airy, never dense. Only a small growing space is required, as most growth is vertical.

Such an airy, thorny habit is useful for a bird, and provides just a bit of sunlight-filtering for plants below. Tenaza foliage is sometimes browsed in winter by sheep and goats.

To identify this tree, I look for symmetrical spines projecting from the smooth, gray trunk. Paired spines emerge, separated horizontally by about an inch, at regular, opposite angles. These pairs rotate around the trunk. The thorns, which make tenaza easy to identify, are attractive from a safe viewing distance. You wouldn’t appreciate them growing near a sidewalk’s edge or a clothesline.

Frequent flowering is perhaps the most endearing quality of this pretty tree. Soon after any “spit” of moisture (South Texas’ substitute for actual rain) tenaza will burst forth in aromatic bloom. Folks have told Mike Heep that tenaza makes flower buds when rain is coming. The creamy-white flowers are reminiscent of delicate shaving brushes, if you are old enough to remember such things.



Insects busily gather pollen and sip nectar from the flowers. Birds arrive to capture the buzzing, high-protein feast.

The seedpods aren’t messy and often remain on the tree while it’s in bloom. The seeds are high in nitrogen, as the tree is a legume, *Pithecellobium pallens*.

Tenaza is closely related to ebony, *Pithecellobium ebano*, in the mind of taxonomists. Both have paired spines. The White Angled Sulphur, a butterfly resident of South Texas, utilizes some members of this family as a host plant.

Mike Heep and Chris Best point out that tenaza grows quickly (desirable for “overnight” landscaping).

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