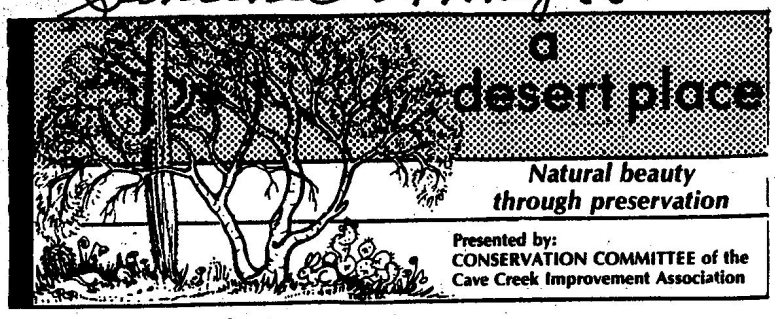
Wolfberries produce a bumper crop

Andy Romanyak Sentinel 29 May 85



This past season we have experienced some spectacular and unusual Desert Foothills botanical sights: early blooming, profusion of blooms, and in many cases the size of the flowers produced. As a consequence, the fruits and berries produced also have been very impressive; and have probably set records not experienced in the past dozen years or so.

One plant in particular this past season could be singled out as having produced an overly abundant bounty of berries that was most evident due to the size, shape and color of the fruit. It is commonly known as wolfberry, boxthorn, squawthorn, rabbitthorn, desert-thorn or tomatillo (little tomato).

The fruit is approximately ¼ inch in diameter, usually juicy and red, and resembling in color and shape of a small tomato. A plant may occur singly or as a thicket. Its shrubby branches are usually sharp, pointed and thorny, and is normally 3- to 6-feet high. The small clustered (fascicled) leaves and tubular flowers, greenish-yellow in color, serve as the best identifying characteristics of the *Lycium* species.

The *Lycium* is a member of the night shade family *(Solanaceae);* which includes such familiar cultivated food plants as the tomato, potato, eggplant, red or cayenne pepper and the ground cherry. In addition, medicinal and narcotic plants include belladonna, tobacco, night shade and mandragora. As an ornamental it's represented by the petunia and seelpiglossis.

Arizona has 16 native species, but only three are common and widespread: *Lycium pallidum, Lycium andersonii* and *Lycium berlandieri.* They are found along washes and on dry slopes of desert and semi-desert areas from 2,500 feet to 7,000 feet. All of the western species have edible berries — but some are juicier and flashier than others, with an insipid, slightly bitter taste. They are eagerly sought by birds who also use the shrubs for cover and protective roosts at night.

Livestock browse the bushes as winter forage if more desirable feed is scarce. Most all of the Arizona species shed their leaves and become dormant during periods of drought — refoliating quickly when conditions become favorable. They flower regularly in spring, often again after summer rains, and are noticeable in winter because of off-season greenery.

Wolfberries are frequently found around old Indian ruins — indicating their contribution to subsidence of the Indians. The berries may be eaten raw, or cooked into a sauce either as a separate dish or used to enliven stews and soups. Mashed in water, they form a beverage. When dried in the sun they look like currants, and become much like raisins — and could be stored away for winter use. They last well if ground into a meal.

The plant is sacred to the Zuni bow priesthood. The priests watch the plant, sprinkling meal at its base, awaiting the appearance of the berries. When the berries do appear, the whole plant is sprinkled with cornmeal while the following prayer is intoned: "May the peaches the coming season be as abundant as the berries (the wolfberry)." There are other versions of this prayer that are documented.

The Zuni word for wolfberry means "water fall down," because the rains cause many berries of the plant to fall off.

It is said that during the famine of 1863, this was the principle fruit eaten by the Hopis, who ground the berries and mixed them with a fine magnesia clay found in the area. They also used the entire wolfberry plant during their Neman or Home Dance.

To the Navajo Indians, the berries have a sacred significance and were used in sacrificial offerings to a Navajo demi-god.

The Papagos, Yumas, Maricopas, Cocopas and Mohaves were among the other groups who relished the berries fresh or dried because the sweetness and juiciness of the berries varies from bush to bush, in an abundant year only the best berries were picked.

Carolyn Niethamner offers two recipes in her book **American Indian Food and Lore.**

Wolfberry Syrup

Boil 2 cups wolfberries in 4 cups water for 1 hour in a tightly covered pan. Strain. Reduce remaining liquid by boiling until it has thickened. Combine syrup with water and sugar to taste to make a beverage.

Wolfberry Sauce

1 cup fresh wolfberries
½ cup sugar
½ cup water
Flour or cornstarch

Combine berries with sugar and water in heavy saucepan. Cook slowly until berries are tender and cooked. Mash a few with a spoon. Thicken the mixture with a little flour or cornstarch.

Finally, juice extracted from the berries can be used in the same manner as cactus prickly pear juice in making a wolfberry jelly or jam. The taste is quite distinctive and quite acceptable.

The trick in the making of these preparations is in taking advantage of the bumper crops when they present themselves and collecting the berries before the birds satisfy their appetites.