

The mesquite: lush refuge

Sentinel May 8 1985

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The mesquite tree in our area is the common one which is also known as a western honey mesquite. However, the characteristics segregating the velvet mesquite and the western honey mesquite are somewhat unstable, which is often the case in plants considered varieties.

It is one of the most common trees in our area. Although it is not as spectacular in color as the palo verde and the ironwood, its heavy, green foliage during the summer months give a pleasant relief to the more drab vegetation of the desert. This year, due to the exceptionally-large supply of rain this past winter, it is very lush.

The mesquite is deciduous, dropping its leaves in the late fall and growing them back in the spring. So during the summer months, when shade is most welcome, they are in full leaf. This affords refuge for birds and other animals. Its foliage and beans are eaten by livestock and rodents.

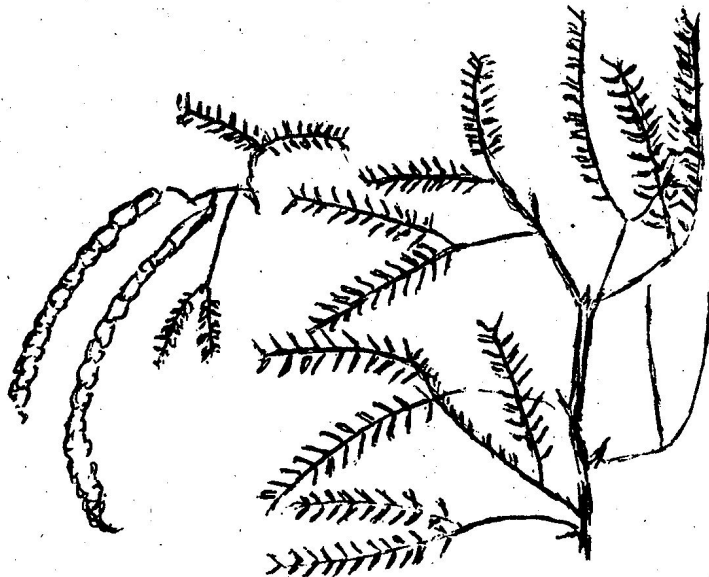
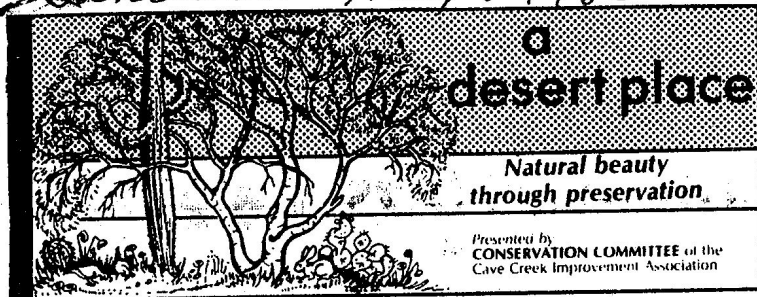
Those not familiar with the mesquite are apt to confuse it with the ironwood tree. They both grow in the same areas, obtain about the same height of 30 feet and are about the same shape. The leaves differ, but are near enough alike to confuse one if not closely inspected. The mesquite bark has a darker and rougher texture, while that of the ironwood is rather smooth and scaly, and both the bark and the leaves of the ironwood have a gray cast.

This time of year the mesquite is adorned with catkins (flowers), that appear as small greenish-yellow cylindric spikes and are somewhat fragrant.

The ironwood, which usually flowers a little later, has purple and white flowers that make a very pretty display.

The mesquite is a survivor, being able to withstand very dry, hot weather. It grows a tap root that often goes as deep as 60 feet, if necessary, to obtain water. Since the seeds need moisture to germinate and sufficient moisture is very uncertain in the desert, the seeds can lie dormant for as long as 40 years, or germinate the season after the fall to the ground.

The mesquite was, and to some extent still is, a source of food for



MESQUITE BEANS were ground into flour by Indians, and the tree's gum was used to make candy. The pods were used to make an intoxicating drink.

drink was made from fermenting pinole. The gum that exudes was used to make candy, to mend pottery and as a black dye. The inner bark was also used for medicinal purposes.

Bees swarm the flowers of the mesquite to collect nectar to make honey. Beekeepers rate the honey made from mesquite flowers as the best in the state.

If you haven't eaten a mesquite-broiled steak, you have missed a great treat.

Betty Graf spotted 14 baby quail on May 1 at the foot of Black Mountain in Cave Creek. Other coveys of babies have been seen in other parts of Cave Creek and Carefree. If you are a motorist and see a quail start across the road, you can almost be certain that its mate and a covey of babies will be crossing right behind. Please slow down! An extra second or two is all they need to get across.