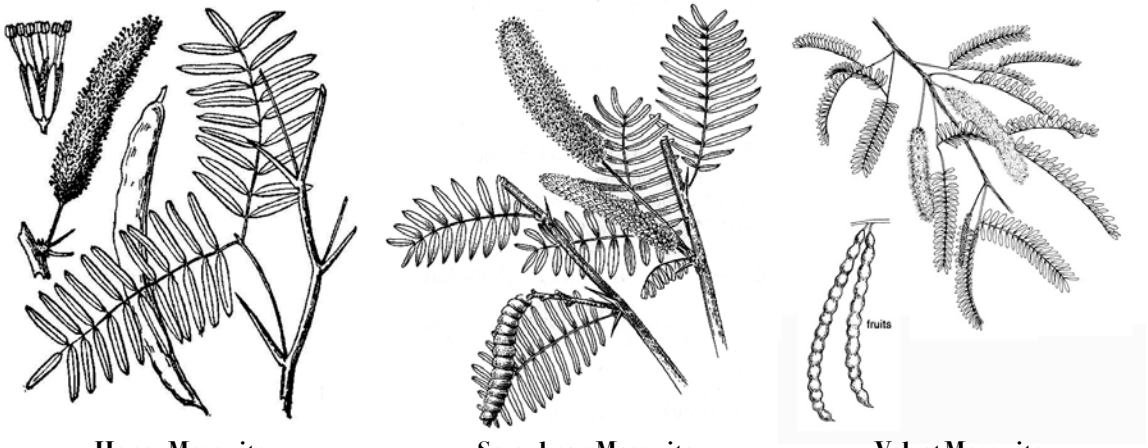
Mesquite

by: Nan Byrne

LUSH REFUGE



Honey Mesquite
Prosopis glandulosa

Screwbean Mesquite
Prosopis pubescens

Velvet Mesquite
Prosopis velutina

There are three species of mesquite (genus: *Prosopis*), but because of their similarity they are generally identified simply as mesquite.

The mesquite is a fast-growing, thorny tree growing to thirty feet tall and wide. It is deciduous, dropping its leaves in the late fall and growing bright green foliage in the spring and summer. The bloom is a small greenish-yellow catkin appearing in April and May. Bees make a delicious-tasting honey from the nectar.

The mesquite pods can be ground into flour. In taste tests, crackers and tortilla chips containing sweet mesquite flour were preferred to those containing conventional flour alone. Agriculture Department researchers also have developed a simple procedure to convert dried mesquite pods into flour and gum that can be used as a natural thickening additive in foods.

Mesquite furnish excellent cover for all types of birds and small mammals of the desert. The seeds are a valuable food source, especially for quail and doves. Mesquite also provide cover for smaller trees and shrubs. It is a common sight to

see a hackberry, salt bush, squawberry, or jojoba growing up through mesquite branches, seemingly a part of the tree.

The mesquite are troubled by a natural enemy, an insect that girdles the bark of smaller limbs, causing the ends to die. Another cause of the die-back is frost. Severe damage can be done by a long, cold spell.

The tap root of mesquite grows very deep to enable it to reach available water. This root is sometimes larger than the trunk of the tree. Sudden drops in water level can cause die-back and even loss of the tree.

Trees that are already damaged by frost, insects or drought can be further weakened by mistletoe, a parasitic plant which infests many desert trees. Much controversy has been waged over the good/bad aspects of the desert mistletoe. Bird watchers tend to favor it for the variety of bird life that feeds on its abundant fruit, which is mostly seed. The elegant phainopepla[1] or black cardinal depends mostly on the mistletoe as a food source.

The seeds of the mistletoe are covered with a sticky substance that enables them to cling to a tree branch. The seed is spread by birds, either through their droppings or by dislodging the seed while feeding upon the mistletoe. Older trees are probably more susceptible to mistletoe growth because the roughness of their bark catches and holds the seed, enabling it to take root.

Complete eradication of mistletoe is impossible without eradicating the host plant. Trees that are heavily infested by old-growth mistletoe are probably best harvested for firewood. Mistletoe can, however, be controlled in healthy trees with new infestation by pruning the limb on which the mistletoe has taken root. The root of mistletoe grows inside the limb and towards the trunk. The longer the mistletoe has been established the more of the limb must be removed. Pruning should be done in March or before leaf-out. Always cover the cut with tar or paint to discourage insects and disease. At this time, dead branches can be removed and the tree shaped by pruning unwanted limbs. If a taller tree is desired, it is helpful to remove lower branches. Mesquite are remarkably hardy, often coming back from the root.

---

[1] See DAC article on Phainopepla, "Black Cardinal is Really Phainopepla," by Nancy Laizure