

HONEY MESQUITE

Prosopis glandulosa Torr. var.
torreyana (L. Benson) M.C.
Johnston
Plant Symbol = PRGLT

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Uses

Ethnobotanic: Many parts of honey mesquite were useful to indigenous groups of California, the Southwest and northern Mexico, and some of these uses are still enacted today. The Cahuilla picked the flowers of honey mesquite in the spring and roasted them in a pit of heated stones, after which they were formed into balls and eaten. The blossoms were also utilized in making a tea. Many tribes in southern California and the Southwest including the Timbisha Shoshone, Nevada and Utah Southern Paiute, Kawaiisu, Cahuilla, Panamint, Luiseno, Pima, Yuma, and Commanche ate the edible pods. The seeds made into a fermented pinole was a favorite intoxicating drink. The Cahuilla gathered the pods in two stages, green or ripe. The green pods were pounded into a juicy pulp and consumed as a summer beverage. The ripe pods were eaten without any processing or were pounded into a flour in a mortar and then placed in a vessel, dampened with water, and left for 24 hours to harden. The meal was formed into cakes and eaten dry, made into a mush, or mixed with water for a beverage.

All other parts of honey mesquite were used. The leaves were used to neutralize stomach acidity by the Commanche. The Cahuilla, Kamia, and Yuma tribes used the inner bark of trunks or branches for cordage and rough wrapping material. The roots of young trees were harvested and made into cordage for harpoon lines, to bundle reeds, and make carrying nets by the Seri of northwestern Mexico. The trunk was made into wooden mortars and the smaller branches were used for bow making. Sometimes arrow foreshafts were of mesquite wood. Mesquite made excellent firewood for cooking, baking pottery, and warmth and mesquite bark was good for kindling. Large branches were used for construction such as posts for houses and rafters. The Seri use mesquite to make the ribs of wooden boats. Thorns were used as a needle in puncturing the skin for tattoos. Mesquite gum was used to glue foreshafts of arrows and adhere baskets to mortars. Tribes of the southwest used the gum secreted from the bark to mend pottery, make candy, and furnish a black dye.

Wildlife: Honey mesquite is an important tree to wildlife. The seeds are eaten by jack rabbits, Gambel quail, songbirds, various small mammal, and domestic livestock. Western chipmunks, ground squirrels, pocket mice, and various species of kangaroo and wood rats consume the foliage. Different birds also nest in the tree's canopy.

Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's current status, such as, state noxious status and wetland indicator values.

Description

General: Pea Family (Fabaceae). The honey mesquite can penetrate downward into the water table, often at great depths. This shrub or small tree reaches less than 10 m in height and has a broad crown of arched branchlets. The ascending branches have straight, stipular spines. The jugate leaves have many long, narrow, leaflets that are more than five times longer than wide, glabrous, and widely spaced on the rachilla or stem. The greenish yellow flowers have fused petals and in dense racemes, 5-12 cm. and spikelike. The fruit is a pod with a prominent beak at the end.

Distribution

For current distribution, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Web site. This plant is the common mesquite tree of the subtropical scrub south and southeast of the Sonoran desert in Sonora. In the desert it is found northward from Guaymas on the coast to the Colorado River and into the low elevation deserts of southeastern California and western Arizona. It occurs in plains, riverbanks, washes and playas in grasslands and deserts below 1800 m.

Establishment

Gather seed pods and remove the seeds from the pods. Scarify the seeds before planting. Plant scarified seeds in the fall in a well-drained soil in deep pots. Sprinkle soil on top of the seeds and cover soil with one-quarter inch of gravel. The seeds should be spaced one-half inch apart and the pots placed in partial shade. Water the pots right away. Keep pots moist if the rains are insufficient. As soon as the plants form one true leaf, transplant one plant per pot and water. Keep the pots damp. Out plant each seedling, in the ground, the following winter when dormant in full sun, and well-drained soil. Protect the plants from animals. Water the plants and keep them damp if annual rains are insufficient. Continue to water throughout the life of the plant once in awhile. Mesquite should be lightly damp all summer long.

Management

The Timbisha Shoshone pruned honey mesquite, keeping areas around the trees clear of undergrowth, and also of dead limbs and lower branches. The Cahuilla in southern California also pruned mesquite trees and broke and cut branches regularly to provide easier access to the seedpods.

Cultivars, Improved and Selected Materials (and area of origin)

This plant is available through most sources in the southwest specializing in native seed. Contact your local Natural Resources Conservation Service (formerly Soil Conservation Service) office for more information. Look in the phone book under "United States Government." The Natural Resources Conservation Service will be listed under the subheading "Department of Agriculture."

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