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Using the Western Honey Mesquite in a Southwest Landscape

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The Western honey mesquite has come a long way from being a refuge for longhorn cattle and a symbol of survival to early travelers of the Southwest. Today this hardy tree is a smart choice for water-conserving landscapes. With proper pruning and irrigation, the Western honey mesquite can add drama, beauty and shade to a home or business.

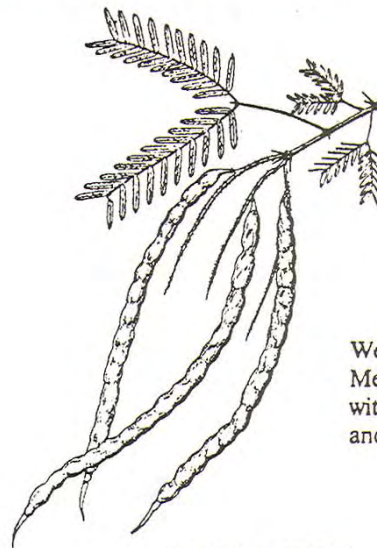
LANDSCAPING

The ability of the Western honey mesquite to survive winter temperatures in the upper elevations of the Mojave Desert makes it an important native tree for southern Nevada. When irrigation is provided, it grows rapidly and adapts readily to the new landscape. The filtered shade it provides makes it an excellent accent or specimen tree for landscaping homes or commercial buildings.

Although a naturally growing mesquite tree has a wild, rangy appearance, pruning can create a lacy, delicate ornamental tree. This picturesque tree provides diffused summer shade for controlling glare and filtering dust and breezes. Pruning for access in and around the tree's base will create a park-like openness that will blend into a garden or natural landscape. The mesquite tree will contribute to a unique and appealing arid landscape as well as a lush tropical theme. When planted in groups it provides an effective privacy screen. It can be useful as a

windbreak and can be planted near utility lines without creating future pruning problems.

In addition to its introduction as part of the native landscape look, the Western honey mesquite can be planted, as space permits, in a woodlot for later use as firewood. Many restaurants now feature steaks and seafood cooked over mesquite wood coals.



Western Honey Mesquite branch with leaves and bean pods.

ADVANTAGES

The Western honey mesquite, *Prosopis juliflora* var. *Torreyana*, is a large shrub or tree native to the southwestern United States, Mexico and South America. Mesquite trees can grow to 30 feet in

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height, with spreading crowns to 40 feet. The branches are crooked, arched, and covered with dark, rough bark.

A thorny, deciduous perennial, this mesquite grows in very warm, dry climates. Roots have been recorded to grow to depths of 150 feet to obtain water. Because of its deep roots, the honey mesquite is highly drought resistant.

In the spring the tree is adorned with an abundance of yellow flowers, rich in pollen and nectar. Bees are thus attracted to the tree. Clear mesquite honey is a favorite with beekeepers. Another advantage of having a mesquite tree growing near the home is that bees attracted to the tree can pollinate fruit and vegetables for the home garden.

The mesquite is common in washes and low places at elevations below 5,000 feet. It can tolerate a variety of soils, but does better on well-drained sites. The younger plants are covered with thorns, disappear as the tree matures.

Due to the arid conditions of the Mojave Desert only a small number of plants survive. The mesquite tree depends on its deep root system and its adaptations to reduce high transpiration rates. Under drought conditions, mesquite trees survive while waiting for the next rainfall but the growth rate is slow and the tree remains small. Irrigation speeds growth and produces a larger tree.

Established trees are more tolerant of an arid environment but take well to deep, infrequent irrigations. Run-off from roofs, driveways, and parking lots can be channeled into irrigation basins.

DISADVANTAGES

While the mesquite tree has the ability to grow and prosper in the desert Southwest, it does have some objectionable characteristics.

Flowers, Pods and Leaflets

In summer, the mesquite tree showers the area around it with the drying remains of its bountiful blooms. The yellow flowers, growing in a dense raceme, develop into bean pods 2 to 6 inches in length that, upon maturing and drying, turn a creamy yellow. The constant rattle of falling bean pods can be heard in late summer. The resulting litter creates cleanup problems on walks, driveways and lawns. The first frost of fall is followed by the drop of the tiny leaflets. These small leaflets, which give the tree its filtered shade, can also be a nuisance near swimming pools and foot traffic areas. Although considered a messy tree, the plant litter is no worse than other deciduous, flowering trees.

Disease

Slime flux, a bacterial disease, causes a dark gummy fluid to ooze through cracks in the bark or at pruning cuts. This fluid stains patio floors and damages or kills plants growing beneath the tree. Slime flux is aggravated if the tree is overwatered.

Insects

Bruchid beetles damage much of the seed crop but control is not a concern. Leaf-footed plant bugs skeletonize some of the leaves. The web-covered tips of branches indicate the presence of Eriophyid mites. They do their share of damage on the leaves though not enough to be of economic concern. Disease and insect damage are generally not fatal although they can be a nuisance around the home. Proper irrigation and fertilization are often the best treatment to counteract any damage.

Thorns

Perhaps the greatest disadvantage of the mesquite tree is its thorns. The sharp thorns make the mesquite a poor selection to use along walkways. The young trees are usually very thorny and create

pruning and maintenance problems. If used as a yard tree in play areas, the owner or maintenance person has to be on the lookout for the small, fallen twigs that can stick to bare feet. However, if properly placed and used in a landscape, thorns need not be a significant problem.

Mistletoe

An unsightly disadvantage to the mesquite tree is desert mistletoe, Phoradendron californicum Nutt.. This parasite is common on most mesquites in the desert and will eventually cause severe dieback. Infections from the mistletoe cause swelling of tissue and the growth of many small, unattractive branches or clumps. The mistletoe's invasive roots spread under the bark, sap the nutrients, and stress the overall health of the tree. After an indefinite period of time, the tree dies because of the mistletoe or the inability to endure the hardships of living in the desert.

Although mistletoe can be controlled by pruning it is not easily eradicated. Because its seeds are coated with a sticky substance, they are carried from one tree to another by feeding birds. Undigested seeds may also be deposited on other branches.

SUMMARY

The gardeners of the Mojave Desert are constantly working with a very special mixture of soil, water, sunlight, air, cold and heat. Landscaping can bring about the environmental change to tame the wind and soften the brilliance of the sun. Water conservation continues to be an important part of landscaping in the Southwest. The Western honey mesquite provides the landscaper with many options. Its few drawbacks pale when viewing this tree in its natural environment--the landscape designed for the Mojave Desert. The mesquite tree depicts the Southwest and is at home on the range, the golf course, around an office complex, or in a backyard.

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