



Desert trees

Anyone a stroll or drive around the wild areas of the amazing Mojave Desert will see a large range of plants, but not many trees. Most trees in formal landscapes are somewhat adapted to this region, but few are natives.

The mesquite trees (*Prosopis spp.*) we occasionally see in managed landscapes are usually the thornless form from Chile, not the Mojave. Opinion varies on these Chilean mesquites, since they are not particularly deep rooted and produce messy flowers and seedpods. Both this form and the native mesquites grow very rapidly, especially if they receive high levels of irrigation. They can reach well over 20 feet in height. There are several native species of this hardwood: velvet mesquite (*P. velutina*) the largest of the group; screwbean mesquite (*P. pubescens*), whose seeds are borne in a tight spiral pod; and honey mesquite (*P. glandulosa*), with its longer, straight seedpod. (Although it is not a problem, and definitely belongs here, the honey mesquite has proven to be invasive when introduced into other habitats.) All the natives are spiny, which is one important reason they are underused. On the other hand, their seedpods are high in protein and even sweet. Once they are established, they require very infrequent, but always deep, watering.



Desert willow

Desert willows are popular, both the species, which produces seedpods that some people find objectionable, and sterile hybrids. Whatever the variety one chooses, it will be tolerant of our salty, alkaline soils. The species tends to grow as a large shrub or multi-trunked tree, which one can train to a single trunk over a few years.

At higher elevations, other natives prevail. Pinyon pine (*Pinus monophylla*), aka single-leaf pinyon, is one of Nevada's state trees. The other is Bristlecone pine, which is not something one finds in a home or commercial landscape. The leaves of shrub live oak

(*Quercus turbinella*) look much like those of holly, but

they are not related. The shrub oak's acorns look much like turbans, hence the species name. In places with ample water, juniper and cottonwood will grow well.

Several of the natives we call "trees" are actually another kind of plant form. Take, for instance, California Fan Palm (*Washingtonia filifera*). This plant, like all other palms, is a closer relative of wheat than of oak. Nevertheless, we still use the term "palm tree".

Among our favorite "trees that are not" is the Joshua tree (*Yucca brevifolia*). This non-tree is the indicator species of the Mojave. Like palms, this is more closely related to members of the grass family than to any tree. In some areas of Southern Nevada, they form stands that are as close to a forest as one can have on the desert floor. This is largest of the American yuccas – many grow upwards of 30 feet tall, although some individuals have measured more than 50 feet. They do not

survive transplanting terribly well if they are more than a few feet tall, although older larger specimens are sold around the valley.

Whether they are really trees or something else, desert natives deserve more attention.

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