

The Weekly Plant

31 January 2016

Common names: desert hackberry, spiny hackberry

Scientific name: *Celtis ehrenbergiana*¹

In our Community: there are numerous plants in the large circular area in front of the community center.

Discussion

This is another one of the “gestalt” plants you identify by form, unless you are lucky enough to find a plant with a few berries. Look for a dense, evergreen shrub, generally rounded in form, that always seems to have at least one wayward branch sticky out. If you get up close, make sure to carefully look for those inch-long thorns in the older part of the plant.

While the plant may be difficult for humans to identify, many desert animals know it well. The flowers - which I have yet to see - are good for honey, so the bees will find it. The berries are eagerly eaten by birds and small mammals, even larger mammals such as jackrabbits and coyotes. Deer will browse the foliage. Desert hackberry is a larval plant for the Empress Leila butterfly (see caterpillar [here](#)) and the snout butterfly. The dense, thorny branches are excellent cover for quail and other birds.

So, if you have a wildlife garden, this is a plant for you.

If you are looking for a nice, friendly, ornamental plant, well maybe not so much. I read repeatedly that it was difficult to work around. However, if you need a barrier plant or simply a dark background to highlight other plants, desert hackberry could find a place in your garden.

Desert hackberry has zig-zaggy branches that hold 1-inch evergreen leaves. The leaves may be smooth around the edge or have just a few teeth. Old short branches become sharp at the end (thorns) but there may also be a two spines



at the base of the leaves. In our desert this shrub grows only to 9-10 feet but in wetter areas can reach 15 feet. It is native to southern Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas and southward as far as northern Argentina.

The flowers start appearing in March and can continue on through the summer (see [here](#) for photo of flowers as well as cute-critters-eating-fruit photos). They are small, whitish, and you may never notice them. The fruit matures several months later, turning a bright orange. Look for the two white stigmas (part of the female sexual parts) that are retained on the end of the fruit.



Desert hackberry is frequent along the lower trails in Saguaro East. Next time you hike, look for them. You may see an Empress Leila butterfly patrolling up and down a wash near the hackberry, protecting its territory. Offer it a juicy piece of fruit - the Empress might just accept.

¹ There is confusion in the literature I consulted. *Celtis pallida* is an older name still used and accepted by some.

Above left: zig-zaggy stems. The short side shoots have become sharp thorns. The leaves may have just a few teeth.

Left: ripening fruit, showing stigmas. There are two sharp stipular spines at some of the nodes.

Photos and text by
Mary Welch-Keesey