Featured Plant

Common Name: Creosote Bush, Greasewood
Scientific Name: *Larrea tridentata*

Art Meen

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After a summer rain in the desert, there is a familiar, distinctive scent in the air. It is the wet foliage of the creosote bush that produces a pungent aroma.

The creosote bush is a resinous evergreen shrub typically reaching a height of 3' - 6' tall and almost as wide. Many flexible stems rise from the base at an angle. Small, leathery leaves are borne at the tips of the stems with the remainder of the stem bare. Leaves are a rich green color when young, fading to a yellowish-green with age. Flowers are small, yellow in color with 5 petals and inconspicuous individually, but under favorable conditions, such as after a rain storm, are numerous and give the shrub a yellowish hue. The fruit is small, roundish and covered with short, white fuzz.

Creosote bush is an extremely tough plant. It is one of the most drought tolerant perennial plants found in North America. It readily grows in the hottest, driest areas and can survive as long as two years without rain. It is tolerant of most soils and is hardy to 5 degrees F.

While the creosote bush has few pests, it harbors many insects. Some, such as the Creosote Bush Katydid (Insara covelleae) and Creosote Bush Grasshopper (Bootettix argentatus) are specific to Creosote bush. Ball shaped galls are often found on the stems, produced by the Creosote Gall Midge (Asphondylia sp.). These insects do minimal damage to the creosote bush. As for mammalian pests, the jackrabbit is the only one that will feed on creosote bush, and then only in times when there is a severe lack of alternate foods.

Creosote bush is very long lived. Some plants in the Mojave Desert are thought to be thousands of years old. An individual stem may grow for hundreds of years. New stems are continuously produced from the outer edge of the root crown. As stems die in the inner part of the root crown, a hole is left in the middle of the plant. Over hundreds of years a ring of stems is formed that eventually grow to appear to be separate plants. An area containing what appears to be many creosote bushes, may indeed be connected and all have the same DNA as they are all from the same original plant.

Given the harsh conditions that creosote bush grows in, it has developed a mechanism for reducing competition with other plants. The roots exude a resin that inhibits the growth of most plants. The roots also secrete a germination inhibitor that prevents germination of its own seeds. With sufficient rainfall, the toxins are temporarily washed away, allowing seeds to germinate if other favorable conditions are present.

In the wild, creosote bush is a rangy, sparse shrub. In a maintained landscape with adequate irrigation, it can be multi-functional -- used as a formal hedge, grown as dense single shrubs or even pruned as a small, multi-trunk tree. When used in a landscape, plant in well-drained soils. Since creosote bushes are difficult to propagate and do not transplant well when salvaged from the wild, they can be difficult to find in nurseries. Check with nurseries that specialize in native plants.

Over time the leaves of the Creosote bush have been used for many medicinal purposes. In various forms it has been used as a treatment for colds, influenza, upset stomach, anemia, fungus infections, auto-immune diseases, and arthritis. A very bitter tea can be made from dried, ground leaves. The medicinal uses have been controversial and use is not recommended.

Overall, creosote bush is a wonderful, hardy, tough shrub that can be successfully grown in a wide variety of settings, from dry desert to a landscaped yard.

Featured Bird

Common Name: Ash-throated Flycatcher
Scientific Name: *Myiarchus cinerascens*

Dan L. Fischer

Dan L. Fischer - Author of Early Southwest Ornithologists, 1528-1900. University of Arizona Press

Searching the desert for birds in early spring can be quite challenging, exciting and rewarding, especially when looking for migrants returning north to nest. Most species follow stream courses and riparian corridors, while others spread over the vast arid region. In many instances they call or sing while others remain silent, only to be noted by quick movements or a flitter of wings among thickets and trees. Still others fly high nearly out of sight, or close to the ground, often undetected.

Because of the variety of field observation difficulties, voice can become a very important aid in locating, and identifying many bird species. The grayish brown Ash-throated Flycatcher with pale gray underparts and rufous tail certainly falls into this category. Occurring from open to rather dense desert scrub, riparian woodlands into chaparral and pinyon pine-juniper woodlands, it usually announces its presence with short, spaced, almost soft musical notes. These are usually given several times before the bird is finally located and viewed. Except for its song, the bird may hardly be noted except when it darts into the open to catch a flying insect. When perched it is poised erect with little movement, carefully scanning the surroundings for prey before taking another short sortie. It seldom returns to the same perch.

Among the over twenty distinctive and easily recognized flycatchers that nest in Arizona, the Ash-throated Flycatcher and a slightly larger relative, the Brown-crested Flycatcher, can and often do present identification problems. Because of their similar physical appearances and habitat choices, they pose difficult challenges in separating one species from another. Voice, therefore, becomes one of the major clues. The song of the Brown-crested Flycatcher is not at all similar to its smaller relative, but has a much louder, sharper, and more raucous tone. The two songs are quite distinctive, and once mastered, their identities are instantly recognized. A third Myliarchus, the Dusky-capped Flycatcher, which is much smaller but also similar to the previous two, sings a series of high-pitched, very soft, prolonged descending whistles and occurs mainly in oak woodlands.

All three species are cavity nesters, generally using old woodpecker holes in cactus and trees to lay their eggs. Any small opening with a chamber of sufficient space will also do, and in the case of the Ash-throated Flycatcher, even grass stuffed vertical fence pipes are used as nesting sites. Usually four to five eggs are laid beginning in mid-April to May and are incubated for about 15 days. The young are tended by both parents and leave the nest after 16 days.

In 1844, Jean L. Cabanis, a German ornithologist at the Berlin Museum, applied the name Myiarchus to a new genus taken from classical Greek myia, “a fly” and archos, “a ruler,” no doubt because of their aggressive manner. Then Captain John P. McCown, a West Point Graduate and field officer, who served during the war with Mexico in 1847, discovered the Ash-throated Flycatcher while being later posted in southern Texas. McCown sent a specimen to George N. Lawrence, a New York businessman and prominent naturalist, who added it to the genus Myiarchus by describing and naming the species in Latin cinerascens, “ashy” for its whitish-gray throat in 1851.