

Featured Plant

Common Name: Velvet Mesquite
Scientific Name: *Prosopis velutina*



Jack Kelly

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Velvet mesquite is one of the most majestic and long-lived trees in the deserts of Arizona. These stately trees can live several hundred years and are often found along waterways and drainages throughout central and southern Arizona and into Mexico. Under ideal conditions, a velvet mesquite may grow up to 30 ft. tall with a four feet diameter, and a canopy spread of 30 ft.

In recent years several other species of mesquite have been introduced into Arizona for the landscape industry.

These rapidly growing trees have had major problems with establishment and have inherent genetic problems that make the velvet mesquite a better choice. Given water and favorable soils, they will grow into magnificent trees in as little as 20 years.

How do you identify a velvet mesquite? The tree derives its name from the velvet-like feel or texture of the tiny short gray hairs that cover most parts of a younger plant. The leaves have one or two pairs of pinnae (small leaves) and up to 30 pairs of leaflets attached to the pinnae. They may be found as a single-trunked tree when growing in bosques (thickets), or as a multi-stemmed tree in open areas. The bark is fissured and dark brown and rough. When the tree is young it may have small thorns that will mostly disappear with maturity.

After the first hard freeze of winter the tree drops its leaves revealing the true beauty of the velvet mesquite. The trunk is beautifully sculpted and dramatic branches sometimes swoop down to the ground. No two trees are alike and each has a special appearance.

When spring arrives, the velvet mesquite is one of the last plants to leaf out. Old timers say that 'a mesquite never gets caught in a late freeze'. After leafing out, two to three inch yellow caterpillar-like flowers called catkins adorn the tree and are soon followed by tan bean pods which ripen mid to late summer. Native peoples milled the pods into a highly nutritious flour and interestingly today the flour is an ingredient used by high-end restaurants in their bread.

The wood, which is often cut while thinning dense stands or removed from grasslands during habitat restoration, is prized for its value in furniture making due to its beautiful coloration, intricate grain and durability. Very little is wasted when harvesting mesquite, the root burls make one-of-a-kind lamp bases, the larger trunks are milled into planks for furniture, smaller branches are sold as firewood and the 'scrap' is chipped into small pieces used in open-fire or smoked cooking. Most mesquite charcoal comes from Mexico which has unfortunately led to the loss of some of the largest specimens of velvet mesquite. When you drive through many communities during winter the fragrance of velvet mesquite fills the air. It is this same wood that imparts that delicious southwestern flavor to steak or other meat that is slow cooked over a mesquite fire-the velvet mesquite.

Featured Bird

Common Name: House Finch
Scientific Name: *Carpodacus mexicanus*



Dan L. Fischer

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

The common name given the House Finch certainly seems reasonable for it refers to a close association with humans and their dwellings. Some of the earliest western observations of this bird were by Dr. Samuel W. Woodhouse while on a reconnaissance for a westward wagon route from Santa Fe under the command of Lt. Lorenzo Sitgreaves in 1851. Two

years later, Dr. Caleb B. R. Kennerly and Baldwin Möllhausen, members of the Whipple Railroad Survey, following a similar route (along the 35th parallel) in northern New Mexico and Arizona, observed them "frequenting the houses and building about the churches" of the upper Rio Grande. Although one of the most common native birds of Arizona and frequently seen, it is often ignored or taken for granted.

Even for the casual observer, two noteworthy features should be mentioned regarding the resourceful little House Finch. First is the strikingly beautiful plumage of the male which exhibits an assortment of reds from crimson to yellow on the head, throat, breast and rump. These colors contrast sharply from their otherwise grayish brown body. The variable pigmentation displayed in the plumage of the male is dependent on their diet. The female is similar but without the rich reddish coloration and appears more uniform grayish brown with a lighter breast that has dark brown streaks.

With the return of spring, the second notable feature begins with the emergence of an uplifting chorus of song by the handsome male. His warbling resounds with notes of upmost cheerfulness and is often repeated with a continuous delightful flow. During courtship the male persists in hopping and displaying about a chosen female with crest feathers raised, head and tail upright, and wings drooping while continuously singing his lovely song.

Although frequently occurring about human habitation as their designated name suggests, the House Finch is quite adaptable to other environments ranging from the low desert areas and riparian drainages to the higher elevations of open ponderosa forest. Generally they are in close proximity to some water source.

Their nest consisting of a cup of fine weeds and grasses is built by the female in a variety of situations from buildings, shrubs, cavities and cholla. The female builds the nest and incubates three to five pale blue eggs, sometimes lightly speckled or streaked dark olive, which hatch in about 13 days. During this period the female is fed on the nest by the male and they both join in feeding the young. After fifteen days the young leave the nest. House Finches may produce up to three broods per season.

German naturalist P. L. S. Müller applied the generic name of *mexicanus* to the House Finch in 1776, after describing the bird from a specimen secured from "the valley of Mexico."