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Join other community members as we work to form a non-profit group to support the Fort. Call us for more information at 575-202-1638.



Fort Selden Historic Site
1280 Ft. Selden Rd.
Radium Springs, NM 88054

Phone (575) 526-8911
Regional Office: (575) 202-1638
nmhistoricsites.org

FORT SELDEN

HISTORIC SITE

MESQUITE



If you've ever stepped on a nasty thorn in the desert that went right through your shoe, odds are you've stepped on a mesquite branch.

Mesquite is one of the most common of the shrubs and small trees found in this region—though small tree might be a misconception as the Chihuahuan Desert-found Honey Mesquite can easily grow to 60 feet tall in the right conditions.

All three species of mesquite trees found in the United States—the Honey Mesquite, the Screwbean Mesquite, and the Velvet Mesquite—are members of the legume family. Its flowers produce seedpods—called beans, like this one here. Mesquite seedpods are tough and can last for decades without going bad.

Their low moisture content preserves them far longer than other plant seedlings. This long-lasting quality not only helps to ensure a mesquite's ability to germinate—sprout more trees—, it also makes the pods excellent for food storage which has made it a really valuable commodity for both indigenous peoples and Europeans.

For example, mesquite seedpods can replace coffee in a pinch. Soldiers during the American Civil War were known to substitute the mesquite beans for their coffee when it was in short supply.

Similar to many other desert plants, the mesquite has developed some unique adaptations to help it survive in an arid environment with very little water. Its thorns are incredibly sharp and strong and not easily broken, as you can see here. Today, you are just as likely to see a mesquite tree in your neighbor's front yard as you are in the middle of the desert. This is because of their really useful natural defenses like their sharp thorns. Humans have domesticated mesquites, planting them as a way of guarding against trespassers, both the human and animal variety.

Although you might be able to recognize a mesquite tree if you find one in your neighborhood what you might not know is just how important this tree has been to thriving human civilizations in the

Southwestern borderlands. Every part of the mesquite has been used in this region for thousands of years for everything from food, medicine, beverages, glue, hair dye, firewood, construction material, and furniture by Indigenous tribes as well as the Spanish and Americans. The Pima tribe of Southern Arizona call mesquite trees the trees of life!



Mesquite wood is great for use in making tools, musical instruments, as well as fuel. It is a great choice for barbecuing! Pima Indians have used the sap of the mesquite tree to make hair dye. They would boil it, apply it to their hair and cover it overnight in mud before washing the hair out the next morning. But what truly makes the mesquite a tree of life is its many important medicinal uses. Every part of the tree has been used for these purposes.

The earliest documentation of mesquite use comes from the Aztec. They would

use the tree's sap and bark and grind them into a powder to make lotions. I'm sure many of you know lotion in the dry desert is really important! The Mescalero Apache had a similar concoction they made by mashing the leaves instead of the bark. But if you don't need lotion, you could also use sap and bark for your upset stomach or to help ease nausea from food poisoning because when you mix the powdered sap and bark into water, you can make a special tea.

Mesquite flowers—before they bloom into the seedpods—also become a tasty tea if you boil them. This tea can be used to treat headaches and stomach pain—like other modern-day green teas—, and might even help heal gum pain! The Comanche chewed on the leaves, like chewing gum, to ease toothaches.

The tree really is a miracle tree! This makes it not only one of the most interesting plants in the Chihuahuan Desert but also one of its most important. You definitely want to be careful as you examine the mesquite tree, those thorns can get you! But it is an incredible plant that has some really unique qualities. Mesquite trees continue to both define and characterize the Chihuahuan Desert, and help the people who live in it thrive.