

Kids' KOrner

Mesquite — A pest with good taste

WASHINGTON — For more than a century, mesquite, the wood that helped support the Alamo, has been cursed, kicked, kerosened, chain-sawed, and bulldozed as a pest in the Southwest.

It's almost impossible to get rid of, experts say of the tough, gnarled tree with roots so deep and wide that it thrives—even can produce bumper crops—during droughts. Varieties of the thorny menace have invaded 55 million acres in Texas alone, growing so thick in places that they choke and rob once-prime range land. In New Mexico and Arizona, another 45 million acres have been infested.

For nearly 40 years, the Texas Forest Service has tried to make something of the "good-for-nothing" tree. "It's called turning a problem into a resource," says Ken Rogers of the Service's Forest Products Laboratory.

All Shapes And Sizes

Finally in the 1980s, mesquite has caught fire. Chunks of it, chips of it, logs of it, and charcoal briquets of it are burning in backyard barbecues and restaurant grills across the country. A new restaurant on the Potomac river near the nation's capital features mesquite-fired steaks and seafood.

There's even a "friends of mesquite" association, Los Amigos del Mesquite, whose 300 members are producers and consumers.

Although the wood can be used for everything from parquet floors to gunstocks, 90 percent of the nationwide mesquite business today goes up in smoke as cooking fuel, says Rogers. Sales are expected to top \$12 million this year. Mesquite competes with another aromatic wood, hickory, for a

distinctive smoky flavoring.

"We used to go out and chop our own mesquite from trees outside Dallas and take it on camping trips for cookouts. We thought, if we like its mellow flavor so much, others probably would too," says Rozan Reed Williams of Dallas. "We pioneered the mesquite-chunks business."

She and her husband, Ray, operate one of the largest mesquite companies, producing three-pound bags of chunks in two seconds, and shipping them as far as Saudi Arabia. What's good for gourmets may be good for cattle ranchers, who welcome harvesters of their nuisance trees. The Williamses' company leases more than 800,000 acres of honey mesquite, one of the three major varieties among some 40 species.

Ironically, the cattle drives of

the Old West spread the mesquite menace. The cattle ate its nutritious pods and deposited them onto the soil in dung left along the trails. Mesquite was spreading like wildfire by the mid-1800s as overgrazing of ranch lands gobled up any plant competitors.

Daily Bread And Diapers

Mesquite was not always maligned, says biogeographer James Humphries of East Texas State University, who has studied the changing perceptions of the indigenous tree.

Not only was mesquite used for cross-timbers in the Alamo and the first fence posts on early ranches, but it provided "40 percent of the diet of most native Americans in the Southwest," Humphries says. "It went from most-favored food source to the status of pest."

flowing again when mesquite was removed from the area. That may be a tall Texas tale, but certainly is true in theory, experts agree.

Mesquite's extensive root system makes it difficult to kill. "If you spray the trees with chemicals, they will be just as bad again in five or six years," Rogers of the Texas Forest Service says. One effective method is pulling them up by the roots, or at least cutting them off about a foot below the surface.

New Markets Sought

The success of mesquite for cooking—it is a dense wood producing an extremely hot fire that sears in flavor—has sparked a search for additional modern uses, Rogers says.

Already the wood is being made into parquet flooring, furniture, gunstocks, and decorative wood carvings. It has a limited market as lumber because the trees grow crooked and only the largest produce long, straight boards.

SPITTLE BUG

He lives inside a house of foam
Beneath a frothy bubbly dome
And you go by and say "snake spit!"
And never know what's inside it
Well hidden there from preying eyes
A tiny, living, green surprise

When I go by a plant or grass
And see that white and tell-tale mass,
I push aside the bubbly foam
And look to see if he's at home
It causes him just minor troubles
To blow again his house of bubbles

Widge Arms



SHOO

Drat the gnat!
He had the whole sky
in which to fly,
but the place he chose
was in front of my nose
DRAT!

Why didn't
he fly
over my head,
behind my back,
anywhere instead
of that small space
in front of my face?
DRAT!

-Margaret Barrow

COLOR THIS!

- | | |
|-----------|---------------|
| 1. BLACK | 6. ORANGE |
| 2. RED | 7. GREEN |
| 3. YELLOW | 8. PEACH |
| 4. BLUE | 9. LT. BLUE |
| 5. BROWN | 10. LT. GREEN |

CLOWNS - A CIRCUS ISN'T A CIRCUS WITHOUT THE ANTICS OF THE CLOWNS WHO GO THROUGH ALL THEIR LAUGH PROVOKING ROUTINES TO AMUSE THE AUDIENCE. SOME CLOWNS MAKE THEMSELVES APPEAR ENORMOUS BY WEARING CUSTOMS WHICH ARE BLOWN UP WITH AIR AND THEN POP LIKE A BALLOON WHEN THEY ARE PUNCTURED.



9-26-85

KERN