

## **Butterfly Honeymoon Destination, the Desert Hackberry**

Usually, I don't include the Latin names of the plants discussed in this series, but in the case of the Desert Hackberry, it would be prudent to do so. The common names of *Celtis ehrenbergiana* (Hackberry, Sugar Berry, False Elm, Spiny Hackberry) can be misleading because the genus *Celtis* is a large one and many plants go by the common name 'Hackberry'.

For this discussion, we are focusing on the Desert Hackberry: a large, evergreen shrub found in or near washes. Growing 8 to 10 feet high in our area, this thorny plant produces a sweet, bright orange fruit in the fall. The fruit is referred to as a berry, but actually it falls into the category of stone fruits or drupes, the same category as olives, peaches, apricots, and almonds.

Native Americans ate the fruit fresh or made them into cakes which could be dried for future use. Birds of all types enjoy the fruit and, interestingly enough, coyotes eat the leaves as well.

Several fascinating butterflies use this plant as a host plant, laying their eggs in early May. When hiking a wash filled with Desert Hackberry, you might be delighted by a burnt orange, lightly spotted butterfly patrolling a few feet off the ground. This behavior is typical of the male Leilia Hackberry Butterfly. He has staked his claim and is protecting 'his' bush, ready to do battle with other males while, at the same time, attempting to entice females as they flutter by. He returns to his same perch when he completes his mission.

In your landscape, Desert Hackberry is useful as a large screening shrub, a thorny barrier plant, or trimmed into a small tree. Oh, and don't forget the value as a bird attractor and honeymoon destination for those amorous butterflies!