

Tree of Life

*By Tom McDonald
Smiling Dog Landscapes*

Plants native to the Sonoran Desert can be beautifully incorporated into your landscape. One favorite is the Mesquite Tree which, with its graceful limbs and delicate leaves, provides shade and elegance to your yard. There are several types of Mesquite: Honey Mesquite, Screwbean Mesquite, and Velvet Mesquite. The seed pods from these varieties can be harvested and milled into flour. A fourth variety of Mesquite, the Chilean Mesquite, is not appropriate for flour production. To determine the type of Mesquite growing in your yard look at the flowers and seed pods. Flowers of the Honey Mesquite are approximately three inches long producing a pod about eight inches long. The Screwbean is easy to spot as it produces corkscrew shaped pods. Fragrant green-yellow spikes of flowers, about four inches long, identify your tree as a Velvet Mesquite.

The Mesquite is known as the Tree of Life in the Southwest. A type of legume, Mesquite is a nitrogen fixer. It has a symbiotic relationship with nitrogen fixing bacteria that reside in nodules within its root system. Through this relationship, atmospheric nitrogen is transformed into a compound that is more readily available for assimilation by other plant life. Glance under any wild Mesquite and you will find a rich, diverse micro habitat serving as a “nursery” for other seedlings. Besides supporting other plant life, the Mesquite provides nourishment for a wide variety of insects and animals. Bees drink up its nectar for honey production and animals from coyotes to livestock enjoy the sweet bean pods.

Mesquite pods are ready to harvest in autumn. A quick way to determine if the pods are ready for harvesting, simply pick one and break it in two. If it snaps, it’s ready to harvest. Chew on the pod for a moment: if it’s sweet, it’s likely to make good mesquite flour. Always harvest directly from the tree as pods that have fallen to the ground can become infested with insects.

To prepare your own Mesquite flour, ensure your pods are completely dry. You can dry them in an oven or dehydrator set on low for a few hours or spread them in the sun. Break the dry pods into one to two inch pieces then place in a Vitamix or other blender. Sift out the fine flour and re-blend the leftover chunky bits until all is ground to powder. Compost or toss any bits resistant to blending. Store your flour in a glass jar in a cool, dark place for up to six months. As a general rule of thumb, you can substitute one part of mesquite for every three parts of regular flour.

Smiling Dog Landscapes has two classes on tap for March:

- Creating Art From Nature with local artist Ruth Ispan-Brown on March 11th from Noon to 4:00 p.m.
- Free Garden Walk on March 12th at 9:00 a.m.

For more information or to register for these classes, contact Smiling Dog Landscapes at 480 288 8749 or email us at info@smilingdoglandscapes.com.