

Algerita - Prairie Jelly
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Algerita, or if you call it agarito, agrito, agrillo, or palo amarillo, it is all the same desirable plant with similar but different pronunciations. Algerita is a leafy evergreen native shrub which grows up to 3 to 6 feet in both height and width with spreading branches. The wood under the bark of limbs and roots of algerita is yellow and has been used to produce a yellow dye. The outward appearance of older branches are brown with small gray spots, while younger stems are brown with gray lines; new yearly twig growth is reddish. Leaves are holly-like growing alternately and showing on the margins 3 to 7 lobes; bluish-green or grayish-green with three stiff, spine-tipped leaflets per leaf. From February through March small yellow flowers emerge from axillary clusters where leaves join the branches. Fruits are numerous red berries growing from these axillary clusters. Whether the plant actually makes fruit depends upon the last frost in your area and the stage of growth of the flowers. If you see the yellow flowers and have a frost, there will be no fruit on that plant for the year. Sorry, but life is hard out in the wild.

Algerita, *Mahonia trifoliolata*, is an important shrub for wildlife and should be maintained. The new leaf growth, reddish in color, is readily eaten by deer and livestock. Even though these new reddish leaves have what appear to be sharp pointed spines, they are actually soft to the touch and can be picked gingerly from the branch tips. The mature bluish-green leaves are too spiny to be consumed and will certainly poke you if you grab them. Animals know to only search for the newer, reddish growth. For this reason algerita is rated as poor browse for browsers, but it is of seasonal importance when the new growth is present. Crude protein values for new leaf growth runs 12 to 16 percent. The ripe fruits are an important food of turkeys and are also eaten by quail, songbirds and small mammals.

Jelly and sometimes wine are made from algerita berries, but the collection of fruit is not an easy task. Many an old-timer has relived stories of how the berries were harvested using a canvas wagon sheet or tarp spread on the ground all around bushes with ripe berries. Then the branches were beaten with cedar stays or other woody branches knocking the berries onto the wagon sheet where the berries could be safely gathered by carefully removing the wagon sheet.

Because the stiffly pointed leaves give the plants a thorny appearance, algerita was often included when mechanically controlling mesquite and/or juniper. Thirty plus years ago you could walk in a pasture where undesirable mesquite or junipers were being bulldozed and often see the yellow roots of algerita that had also been dozed. After all, in that time, any woody plant that had thorns or was prickly was subject to being dozed along with the targeted species. Times have changed and now landowners and dozer operators know what this shrub looks like and make efforts to preserve it when dozing. Landowners recognize its value as loafing cover for quail, protection for many songbirds, and as protection for young grasses and forbs to germinate and grow under its protective branches. The highly fragrant flowers also provide much needed nectar and pollen early in the spring to many pollinators.

Algerita is found on dry rocky hills and gravelly flats over the western half of the state. If algerita becomes over abundant the use of prescribed burning will top-kill the plants but not eliminate this desirable native from the landscape. Start watching to see if the algerita flowers in your pastures survive a late frost and you will soon be in the jelly making business. It makes excellent jelly with a natural light-reddish color. A native that is good for livestock, good for wildlife and good for mankind, what more could be asked?

Photo Captions:

1 A mature algerita plant loaded with fruit in this early June photo.



2 New stem growth reveals the reddish stage that is soft, palatable and nutritious for all browsing animals.



3 Ground level photo reveals the numerous stems first spreading upward then outward providing cover for small wildlife species.



4 Clusters of ripened fruits available for wildlife or for jelly making.



5 Mature leaves of algerita display the 3-7 spine-tipped lobes.

