

Texas Mulberry

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Perhaps your memory of a mulberry tree takes you back to your youth and you remember it being an excellent tree for climbing and the producer of numerous red or black berries that are edible. Fast forward to your adulthood and you experienced the misfortune of having a mulberry tree in your yard dropping berries that stains concrete drives and might be carried into the house on the bottom of your shoes. Texas has three species of mulberry trees that you may have seen. White mulberry is an introduced mulberry that was promoted as fast-growing though it tended to have numerous roots surface making it difficult to mow or walk under this species. Red mulberry is a native mulberry that produces edible fruit but is not used as a landscaping tree, more commonly seen along upland woods and riparian areas over the eastern half of Texas. The pick of the litter is the third species known as Texas mulberry which is not large enough to climb into but does produce the sweetest fruits.

Texas mulberry or mountain mulberry is a thickly branched native shrub or small tree that grows to 20 feet. Bark is gray or lightly tinged with red with shallow fissures and thin flat, flaky scales. Twigs are slender with white hairs, later becoming smooth, lenticels, or breathing pores in the skin of the stems are small and round; newest twig growth is reddish-green. Leaves are simple, alternate, deciduous, $\frac{3}{4}$ - to 1-inch in width and $1\frac{1}{2}$ to $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches in length, ovate to oval, margins coarsely toothed or sometimes with two or three lobes, rough to the touch on both upper and lower sides, tips usually pointed with base squared off or rounded, upper surface dark green, roughened and pubescent, lower surface paler with three prominent veins, roughened and may be smooth or hairy. Petioles, or leaf stalks, are slender, pubescent, reddish and $\frac{1}{2}$ - to $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch in length. Separate male and female flowers on different trees, in clusters $\frac{1}{2}$ - to $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch in length. Fruit is called a syncarp or multiple fruit, oval and red maturing to black. If you observe a Texas mulberry shrub or tree in May and it doesn't have fruit you are looking at a male of the species. The fruits found on the female shrubs will be green in April turning red in early May and maturing to black by late May or early June. The ripened fruits within reach can be easily picked off the trees, but care must be taken since the ripe fruits fall easily when touched. Holding a cup under the fruit will catch those that you shake loose or if they slip from your fingers. The ripe fruits are very juicy and will stain your hands red upon harvesting. Fruits should be washed in water and mashed to remove as much pulp as possible and allowed to air dry. Drying prevents fermentation and is necessary if you want to gather seeds to grow your own Texas mulberry plants. Plant in full sun and provide protection from browsing by all animals.

Texas mulberry provides excellent browse value for deer, goats and antelope. It is occasionally browsed upon by cattle, and the fruit is eaten by deer, turkey, quail and songbirds. Native Americans grew this tree for its food value and for the wood that was made into bows. Texas mulberry can be found in all vegetational regions of Texas with the exception of the Piney Woods and the Gulf Prairies and Marshes.

These plants should be monitored for overuse by deer and browsing exclosure cages placed around the affected trees. Surviving plants are often found in terrain that is difficult to access such as canyons and rock ridges. Texas mulberry plants found along riparian areas are most often subjected to excessive browsing because of the ease of access by animals. The presence of seedling trees away from mature plants would indicate proper grazing management and a stable deer density. Texas mulberry is a desirable native shrub or tree and should be grown on your land. I hope you see some of these plants and sample the tasty fruits.

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Photo captions:

1 Texas mulberry growth form as a multi-stem shrub in the Rolling Plains of West Texas.



2 Texas mulberry reaching small tree size in the Rolling Plains.



3 Texas mulberry growing at edge of Ashe juniper thicket in the Cross Timbers of Texas.



4 Teeth will be found on all leaves, but margins can be either entire, shallow lobed or deep lobes with one to three lobes.



5 Whether the leaves are lobed or not, all Texas mulberry leaves will have rough texture and a feel of sandpaper.



6 Fruit matures from green to red and ripens as sweet black berries.



7 Texas mulberry fruits near riparian areas can be carried downstream by water flow spreading the potential growth across many ranches.

