

OCOTILLO



It was a young boy in Boquillas Canyon who formally introduced me to the ocotillo more than 40 years ago. I was walking into the canyon and ahead of me was a young man also walking into the canyon. From maybe 20 feet behind I watched as he reached up to a clump of dazzling red flowers at the end of what appeared to be long, dead sticks and pulled a few off. As I walked by him I stopped and watched as he bit off the base of each flower and sucked out the nectar. Then I reached up to get some flowers and repeated his actions. He laughed at me and then I laughed at him. It was like sucking up nectar from a honeysuckle, maybe even a little sweeter. We then spent the better part of the afternoon walking among the flowers, laughing and sucking out nectar. It was a fine day. At that time I spoke little Spanish but managed to learn a lot about the ocotillo and the roles it plays in the Chihuahuan Desert from this young man.

Few plants can play more on the imagination than the ocotillo. In form it resembles nothing so much as a giant bouquet of dead sticks branching out at ground level and sending as many as 50 stems from three to twenty-five feet into the air. Each stem is armed with spines along its length, making it a rather formidable plant. For most of the year we see only these bare stems, but after a

good rain, short, green leaves appear. These are about an inch long and cluster at the base of the spines. When arid conditions return the leaves are quickly shed, preventing the loss of too much moisture from the plant through the leaves. The ocotillo also produces another type of leaf. During its growing season smooth green leaves appear on the new growth. These leaves will curve inward near their bases and change from a soft petiole to a hardened sharp spine one-half inch long. In only a few other plant families do spines develop from leaves.

The ocotillo is well adapted to desert life and seems to prefer the arid gravelly foothills and limestone ridges where little else grows. They may be found as widely spaced individuals or in a large gathering covering several acres. The plant is protected from dryness by a waxy sheath under its bark. The root system is shallow, widespread, and sheathed with a corky substance that enables it to quickly absorb what little moisture may penetrate the ground. It is a sturdy plant, well equipped to survive in the harsh environment of the Big Bend country. Where its only enemy is, seemingly, the wind which will occasionally topple the plant. I have seen woodpeckers pecking at the stems of the plant but only a few times.

Since the ocotillo grows only in the Chihuahuan and Sonoran Deserts it is probable that early settlers to the Big Bend had never seen the plant before. A large number of common names were used to describe the plant, including: coach whip, Jacob's staff, and candle wood. Ocotillo was an native American name for the plant and seems to be the most popular name today. A few other names, such as vine cactus and candle cactus, gave the misleading impression that this plant is a member of the cactus family. Although it was readily apparent to the botanist that the ocotillo was not a cactus (cactus do not develop leaves after a rainy season), they really didn't know how to classify it. Eventually they decided to place it in its own family of plants which consists of a few different species of ocotillo and the boojum tree of Baja California. In the spring, whether there has been any rain or not the ocotillo usually blooms. Bright, flame-red flowers cluster about the tips of the spiny stems. There are faintly fragrant with sweet, viscous nectar. There may be as many as 300 flowers clustered on a single stem (though the usual number is about 120). Some plants have as many as 500 clusters of inch -long flowers. After the flowers wither, the seed pod matures, eventually splitting open at the top to reveal silky white seed, each with a long fringe of spirally thickened hair. The wind will disperse these so that they can germinate and produce new plants. The process may be repeated several times during the year because this plant is in tune with rainfall, not seasons.

Man in the Big Bend found many uses for the ocotillo. The seed could be eaten, the flowers made a soothing tea. A poultice from powdered roots relieved pains of arthritis and rheumatism. The wax found under the bark of the plant was used

for tanning hides. Bundles of dried ocotillo stems were used as torches, the wax in them producing a bright flame. This same wax was used by later settlers as a furniture varnish. The ocotillo was an important building material, whether woven into walls or laid flat and covered with mud for a roofing material. The plant was, and still is, important as a fencing material, often the cut stems, when placed in the ground, take root to provide a living fence, leafing out after summer rains and then blooming.

Today ocotillos are disappearing from the Chihuahuan Desert as ranchers, seeking a cash crop, sell their ocotillo to landscapers. Trucks loaded with thousands of pounds of ocotillo plants can be seen leaving the desert every spring, making our desert just a little bit more deserted. I am glad ranchers have an income, and I'm glad others throughout the country find the ocotillo attractive. But this plant is part of the Chihuahuan Desert so I hope some will always remain.

POSTED BY Patt Sims - April, 2011