



“Brush Holly provides beautiful feasting spots for birds.”

FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Xylosma flexuosa*

Common Names: Coronillo, Brush Holly

Family: Flacourtiaceae

Even Plants Have Sexual Needs

Winter berries are becoming scarce just now, except in places where Brush Holly grows. Of special value are these plants which provide fruit when others are barren. During the winter of 1998 this little-known plant was loaded with mid-winter red berries after many months of drought. At that time, most plant species in the wild were devoid of fruit.

Arbor month (February for the LRGV) is an excellent time to consider adding a native berry-producing tree or shrub to your yard. Brush Holly is an especially good choice for planting below a Sabal Palm.

Xylosma flexuosa is the scientific name for Brush Holly. Locally, it's known as *Coronillo*.

Leaves are dark green and lustrous, like traditional Christmas “holly.” They aren't deeply notched or rigidly pointed, but crinkled on leaf edges. Thorns occur on the stems, though they're relatively innocuous. Mike Heep has encountered some specimens with virtually no thorns.

Like your mental image of holly, *Coronillo* has red berries. They ripen from yellow through red to purple-black. They're tasty. Those which grow in full sun are very tart. Grown in shade, they're sweeter. I've survived eating many of them on every available occasion. The only noticeable side-effects are a purple tongue and avian jealousy. (Birds are jealous that a large beast is devouring their fruit. I'm jealous of their ability to zoom onto branches beyond my reach.)



Brush Holly is known to flower at intervals throughout the year. In my yard, it's often loaded with tiny, white, compact flower-buds abuzz with pollinators. All blossoms may be male, or all female. Each flower is of one sex or another and both sexes may be on the same plant. Mike Heep tells me that female flowers sometimes bear fruit without pollen from a male.

Despite all those possibilities, my plants have borne no fruit. They're sexually unfulfilled, I assume. I've planted several juveniles nearby, hopefully of the right sex. It's a good idea to plant in multiples, to provide *Coronillo* with an appropriate partner.

Heep says that Brush Holly prefers low-lying wet places, like resaca banks. I photographed this plant on a Brownsville resaca bank on Jan. 10, 2003, so now I believe him.

Brush Holly requires low amounts of water and is drought-tolerant.

It is typically an understory plant, often growing at the edge of wooded areas. It will grow in filtered shade or full sun.

The maximum height is twenty feet. Usual height is five to ten feet. The growth form is usually that of a lanky, sprawling shrub which can be pruned to encourage more compact growth.

Near Alton Gloor in Brownville, a mature ebony forest is being transformed to a new neighborhood. In most cases, the largest trees are being preserved as houses are constructed. On many of those lots, Brush Holly can be found. There is incredible native plant diversity in the area, including Crotons thought to be native only further west, David's Milkberry, Barbados Cherry, Tropical Sage, Mountain and Texas Torchwood, and many others. While trees are being saved, it seems that few folks notice the native vines, shrubs, grasses, groundcovers and wildflowers which are there. On lots where construction is complete, these species have been bulldozed, covered with turf grass, and nursery-grown shrubs have been carefully planted.

In areas like Austin, Boulder, Tucson, Santa Fe, Taos and Albuquerque, folks prefer to leave native vegetation intact. Interesting walkways are created and irrigation systems added to enhance the natural growth which occurs.

In this fashion, wildlife which has depended upon that small piece of habitat is not so completely displaced. With a bit of irrigation and removal of competing tall grasses, the remaining plants may even provide more nectar, fruit and shelter than they could normally provide, especially during times of drought.

Few of us find building lots with the kind of diversity present in a mature Ebony forest, as few of those remain. As yet, few homes serve as visible examples of protecting native vegetation as a means of "landscaping" relatively small lots. Such examples would add greatly to public understanding and awareness.

For those who wish to add a berry-producer to an existing landscape, Brush holly is an excellent alternative to readily-available exotics. It will not grow as rampantly, for example, as Brazilian Pepper. Brush Holly will not overtake an entire resaca or arroyo bank or infest an entire pond. Brazilian Pepper is guilty of all those charges and more horrific ones, as the leaves appear to be inedible for resident wildlife.

The Native Plant Project has included *Coronillo* in "Native Shrubs of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas." Photographs and information about it can be found on their website at www.nativeplantproject.org.

Brush Holly is available at several native plant nurseries, including Wild Bird Center in Harlingen and Valley Nature Center in Weslaco.

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Return to Website: www.riodeltawild.com.