

Olneya tesota

DESERT IRONWOOD is an evergreen to semi-deciduous tree (according to climate). Native from south-western North America to Mexico (particularly the Sonoran Desert) it has small pea-like, pink to lavender-blue flowers.

It is also known as Arizona ironwood, Ironwood, *Palo-de-bierro* (Mexican), and Tesota. The wood is so dense and heavy that it sinks in water.

Tesota is derived from Spanish *tieso* (stiff, firm).

The small ripe hairy brown fruit pods and their shiny brown seeds (which are said to have a peanut butter-like taste, *Arachis hypogaea*) have provided food for quite a few North American Indian tribes and were often stored for Winter use. They were a staple part of the diet for the Yavapai and Tohono O’Odham Indians, and the latter used dried, mashed seeds to make small greasy cakes. Some of the Tohono O’Odham ate the dried seeds as they were, whereas the Yuma and Mohave Indians roasted them slightly – and also like the Cahuilla ground them for bread flour. The Cocopa tribe and the Middle American Seri Indian tribe used ground, roasted seeds to make a kind of porridge. [There are some reports that the Seri Indians took trouble to counter an alleged unpleasant smell associated with the cooked seeds. Apparently they cooked the seeds in fresh water twice (replacing the first cooking water with clean water for the second processing).]

From records it seems that the very hard wood was also of value. Some of the Tohono O’Odham used it to make wooden stakes (which were driven into the ground and used for weaving), arrowheads and tool handles, while other parts of the tribe fashioned widely-notched concave rods for musical rattles. The tribe used the wood for building too. Cahuilla Indians made war clubs from it, and they and some of the Tohono O’Odham tribe also burnt the wood as fuel.

The foregoing indicates the importance of the trees to the lives of those who live in the region and this is further reflected in their inclusion in Indian legend. One story from the Seri tribe describes how a giant chewed the seeds and blew the pulp over the surface of the waters thus calming them so that the fisherman could harpoon his catch.

Locally the seeds have been roasted to provide a substitute for coffee beans.

At the turn of the 20th and 21st Centuries these drought-tolerant trees are threatened with extinction from over harvesting. (When completely dry they are a sought after fuel long prized for its long-burning qualities – the latter of sufficient importance to counter its pungent, musty smell when alight.) The trees are also a host for desert mistletoe (*Phoradendron californicum*) which can infest them and weaken if not kill them – and to cap all this there has been a growing tendency to cultivate buffel grass (*Cenchrus ciliaris*) in desert ironwood regions. This grass is also drought-tolerant but it is invasive and offers the ideal surface over which fire can flow with lightning speed – a hazard to which desert ironwood trees succumb. The trees’ extinction would not be only a botanical and environmental loss. Since the 1960s the Seri Indians (and subsequently other locals) on the edge of the Sonoran Desert have carved this wood into figurines for tourists and the scarcity of these trees is already threatening their livelihood.

Some authorities have noted that few desert birds have been sighted nesting in the trees’ branches although records do not suggest why this might be. On the other hand it has also

been noted that the trees can live as long as 200 years and their foliage provides food and shelter for some wildlife (as well as domestic animals such as cattle), together with a conducive habitat for desert plants. In the hot desert climate the air temperature can be as much as 15° cooler in the trees' shade and the soil beneath them is usually richer. Birds (such as doves and quail), coyotes and small rodents enjoy eating the seeds. The trees can be seen cultivated as ornamental plants in their native region.