



Wild Mulberry

Morus celtidifolia Kunth; *Morus microphylla* Buckley

Moraceae

Species description

These wild mulberry species are woody shrubs or small trees with numerous branches emerging from the root base. The trunks and branches have grey, fissured, and scaly bark. The leaves are ovate with serrated margins, and sometimes 3-5 lobed. Green and red-tinged flower catkins appear in April-May. Wild mulberry fruit is sweet, small, and composed of multiple compressed drupes, similar to a small blackberry.



Natural and cultural history

These species of wild mulberries are native to the southwestern U.S., across to Texas and Oklahoma, and into northern Mexico. They grow in dry canyons and arroyos, in open valleys and on hillsides in Sonoran and Chihuahuan desert scrub plant communities, grasslands, oak and pine woodlands, and occasionally in tropical deciduous forests. Indigenous peoples utilized the mulberries throughout the range of the species. North American Indians cultivated the shrubs for their edible fruit.

Planting considerations and propagation techniques

Wild mulberries can grow to 20+ feet in height and equally broad in width because of its many-stemmed shrub-like nature. The trees/shrubs prefer areas in full sun, but will tolerate partial shade. These species of mulberries can be found from 600-7,200 feet in elevation and may be very cold tolerant. They are wind pollinated and self-fertile but cross-pollination provides greater yields. The species prefer moist, well-drained soils that can be sandy to heavy clay.



Wild mulberries may be propagated from seeds or cuttings. The seed germinates best if given two to three months of cold stratification (leaving the seeds in a cold area for the winter, usually packed in wet sand). Sow the seed outdoors as soon as the fruit ripens if possible; otherwise sow them in February in a cold frame. If planted in the fall, wild mulberry seeds usually germinate in early spring, though they may lie dormant for another twelve months. Wild mulberry cuttings can be rooted; use cuttings of half-ripe wood, 7-10cm in diameter with a heel, and plant them in July or August in a cold frame or protected area. These can be planted out in spring once they have developed roots.

Water needs

Mulberry trees have medium water requirements once established. Mulberry shrubs and trees prefer rich, moist habitats and should be given regular deep irrigation in the summer.

Care

No special pruning techniques are required for wild mulberries. Remove dead and over-crowded branches, and prune them to fit the yard or garden space. Mulberries heal poorly from wounds so larger cuts should be avoided.

Harvesting and processing

Harvest wild mulberry fruits when they are ripe, soft, and pick easily. This may be from June to September, depending on local climate conditions. Fruits are similar to cultivated mulberries but much smaller, blackish at maturity, fleshy and tasty. Keep in mind that wild species do not yield the quantities of cultivated mulberries, though they are beneficial to wildlife.

References and resources

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