

Texas Mountain Laurel

By Pam Niesl

I fell in love with the Texas Mountain Laurel before I even knew its name because of its brilliant purple flowers and fragrant grape scent. The Texas Mountain Laurel (*Dermatophyllum secundiflorum*) is a woody, evergreen, perennial, large shrub with dark green foliage and brown multi-trunk. It is slow growing to 10-25 feet in height and prefers little pruning, done only in late April/early May. The shrub is slow to recover from severe pruning. It is heat loving; likes full sun and well-drained soil. In the Phoenix area, deep water every 1-2 weeks. It is attractive as an accent, an informal hedge, background screen, a small patio tree, or in a mixed low-water use garden landscape. Its flower buds start in August but are latent until late February through early March. The flowers attract bees, butterflies, and even hummingbirds. The fruit consists of brownish-gray cluster pods containing hard red seeds (mescal beans). The Texas Mountain Laurel shrub and seeds are poisonous; something to keep in mind if you have pets and/or kids.

I learned, quite by accident, that the Texas Mountain Laurel has another name. I took my visiting son and daughter-in-law to the Boyce Thompson Arboretum in March and to my delight, their multitude of Texas Mountain Laurels were in full bloom. I proudly announced the name but was embarrassed when we saw signs labeling it "Mescal Bean". Thank goodness for cell phones and Google. I learned it is the same plant.

Texas Mountain Laurel is susceptible to caterpillars of a small white Pyralid moth in late summer and fall. The caterpillars are attracted to the vegetative growth so do not attempt to speed up this naturally slow growing shrub with the excessive fertilization. Biological control agent BT (*Bacillus thuringiensis*), available at nurseries, can be used to treat caterpillar infestation. A gray leaf variant of the shrub is more caterpillar resistant.

Native Americans have used mescal beans from the Texas Mountain Laurel in ceremonies, and in jewelry, for generations. Additional information on this is available in this research article: <https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1525/aa.1957.59.1.02a00070>

One bit of advice: I researched and considered getting a Texas Mountain Laurel five years ago when I wanted to add more shrubs to my yard. It fit all my requirements – flowering, hot weather hardy, low water needs, lush growth – with the added benefit of the delicious scent. I decided it against it because of its slow growth. Five years passed quickly and I realized that I would have a nice looking shrub if I had bought one then, instead of this past week. If you are considering the Texas Mountain Laurel, get it now!

Note: Primary source for this article:

<http://www.public.asu.edu/~camartin/plants/Plant%20html%20files/dermatophyllumsecundiflorum.html>

Note: The scientific names for Texas Mountain Laurel were formerly *Calia secundiflora* and *Sophora secundiflora* so you might still see it referred to by those names.

Photos:

Texas Mountain Laurel during March Bloom at Boyce Thompson Arboretum



Mescal Bean Pods



Mescal Bean Jewelry

