

Coahuilteca Foraging

Article by Jim Grizzard, Rio Grande Valley Chapter



Thorn scrub habitat – photo by Diane Hall

With her eyes wide open for a rattlesnake, Akeye crawled on her stomach - the sharp thorns of the low blackbrush and mesquite branches scraping across her back as she gathered mesquite screw beans and Texas ebony bean pods. The strongest Coahuiltecas had disappeared with their bows, arrows and nets before sunrise.*

Akeye, four other children and three elders foraged for agave bulbs, tunas (prickly pear cactus fruit rich in carbohydrates and vitamin C), cactus pads (an excellent source of calcium and vitamin A) and all that was edible within a long stone's throw from their squat dome huts. Two elders tightly wove a durable fabric from the sabal palm fronds, various grasses and young cedar elm and desert willow branches to replace the worn covers (as a skin) and ropes (as connective tissue) of their squat dome huts and netting for hunting and fishing.

The low, dense forest of Texas ebony, huisache, palo verde, wild olive, Texas persimmon and other gnarly trees provided the sticks to make skeletons for their circular portable homes, bows and arrows, clubs and camp fires, as well as the habitat for the birds, rabbits, turtles and other animals that had fed them for thousands of years.

Survival drove almost every action from sunrise to sunset. Special moments were reserved for story time, singing, dancing and recreation. Ocha, grandmother of Akeye, called Akeye to collect leaves, flowers and roots from many of the plant species surrounding them and to learn about them. Almost every plant had vital medicinal properties to keep them alive.

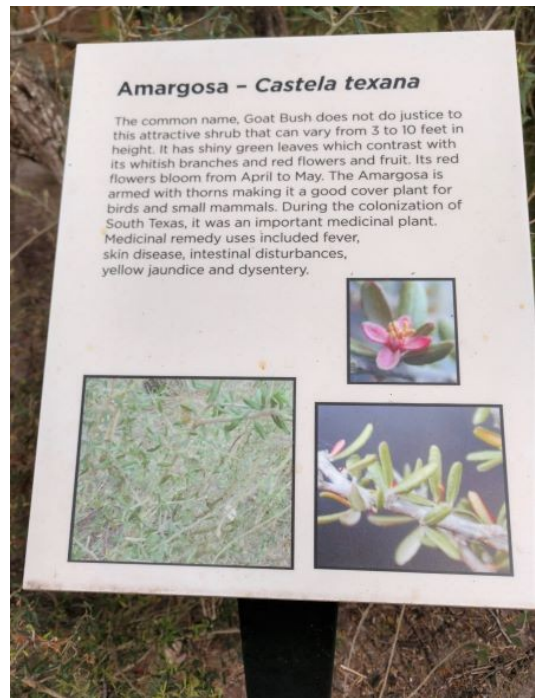
Prickly pear was not only used as bread and vegetables to them, but also medicine. The pads could treat diabetes, boils, and prostatitis. In addition, it was used to reduce the rate of sugar absorption and insulin shock, lower cholesterol and prevent glycemia. *Lantana camara*, *Parthenium hysterophorus* and other plants repelled swarms of mosquitoes and other biting insects.



Prickly pear cactus in bloom – photo by Diane Hall

Wax mallow (*Malvaviscus arboreus*) could help cure bronchitis, cystitis, diarrhea, fever, gastritis, hypertension, kidney, liver and gall bladder diseases, tonsillitis and skin lesions. Leaves of the Texas mountain laurel (*Sophora secundiflora*) could be ground into powder to cure ringworm, psoriasis and skin lesions. Rheumatism and bronchial congestion could be relieved with leaves of the Texas olive, and its fruit, though not savory, was food. *Plumbago scandens* leaves would help remove warts and treat skin diseases. Its roots would aid toothache and ulcers.

Over 85 percent of the plant species now found at Hugh Ramsey Nature Park offered them and now us medicinal value. In addition to the infinite treasure of nature to feed our souls, the reality that some 25 percent of all prescribed drugs are derived from plants, calls us to preserve native plants and their habitats. The Coahuiltecan needed these plants to live. So do we.



Interpretive sign at Hugh Ramsey Nature Park
—photo by Diane Hall

*The Coahuiltecan roamed the expanse of the Rio Grande Valley as hunter gatherers in small nomadic bands for well over five thousand years. As many as 15,000 Coahuiltecan may have lived in Rio Grande Valley by the time the Spanish arrived. After a Texas census in 1824, the Coahuiltecan were thought to be extinct, though a few had assimilated into other native populations. Smallpox, other old world diseases and slavery decimated the Coahuiltecan. Spanish missionaries regarded them as peaceful and approachable (unlike the Apache and Comanche). Coahuiltecan slaves, encomiendas (families indentured as servants) or converts purportedly built the Alamo mission. Reportedly, at least one soldier who fought with the Texans attempting to defend the Alamo in 1836 had Coahuiltecan heritage.