

## We Saw the Trees of Gold

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In response to the frigid arctic air that reached down into deep South Texas, and the slightly warmer, seasonal temperatures that followed, the spectacle of spring has come early with much to show. The brushland trees and shrubs are already painting their colors against the formerly dry, unassuming chaparral in hues of whites, yellows, pinks, and more. Anacua, blackbrush, guayacan, huisachillo, mesquite, and palo verde are a few of the artists already at work in this annual exhibition.

Amongst them is one that will always stand out for me. Perhaps you have already caught a whiff of its aromatic scent in the air, or seen glimpses of its orange puffballs emerging from the greening brush as you venture by. I like to think of this species as the brushland equivalent of Japanese cherry blossoms. This honorable mention is our tell-tale sign that spring has begun - its blooms will fully peak in March before receding as other flowering natives step in to take its place. By now you may have already guessed - it's none other than the Texas huisache.



**Huisache** occurs throughout the southern portion of Texas down into Mexico, inhabiting several of Texas' ecological regions. It is currently described as *Vachellia farnesiana*, reclassified from the genus *Acacia*. It is still referred to as sweet acacia, a misnomer carried on from its previous classification. The name huisache comes from Nahuatl, meaning "many thorns," a fitting description for this brushland native. A young tree will have characteristically large thorns on its branches, but as it grows, these thorns diminish in size and can be found in pairs at the base of their leaf petioles.

Huisache (*Vachellia farnesiana*) new foliage and blooms

As a deciduous tree, huisache will lose most of its leaves during winter, but new growth of pinnate leaves can be seen on its slender branches at this time. As the trunks and branches mature, the bark goes from smooth to rough with uneven grooves - much like that of mesquite. Its rounded, orange flower heads appear in spring and eventually turn to hardy, thick seed pods.



**Huisachillo**, *Vachellia schaffneri*, "little huisache," or twisted acacia (another misnomer) is often confused with huisache. I will note, I myself previously confused the two.

Joshua Ekrot, a fellow iNaturalist botanist, gave some tips to differentiate the two: the key difference is huisachillo has its petiolar gland located at the base of its leaf stem. Huisachillo also has zigzag limbs with prominent nodules.

Huisachillo (*Vachellia schaffneri*) has zigzag limbs with prominent nodules.

I also noted that the seed pods are long and thin, while those of huisache short and blunt, and usually curved in a crescent moon-shape. A slight difference in bloom color is noticeable, but would not be enough to distinguish the two species alone. Lastly, huisachillo is more shrub-like while huisache can mature into a tall tree reaching 20-plus feet tall.



Note the difference between the seed pods of huisache and huisachillo

The primary differences are important to learn when wanting to identify either plant, especially since they coexist in the same habitat. Huisache can also be found in various habitats alongside mesquite, blackbrush, and retama, for example, although it can notably be found near wetlands and riparian areas. I have observed them lining the Arroyo Colorado and growing near or close to ponds and canals. The USDA, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, and Native Plant Project all provide useful information in regard to plant description and ecological range/habitat.

A personal favorite among our native flora, huisache holds sentiment for me, and perhaps I owe it credit for sparking my interest native plants. It was the blooming huisache along the Arroyo Colorado River that captivated me back in March of last year. At a time of economic uncertainty, when gas prices were remarkably increasing overnight, I opted to bike to work as I had done once before. When you bike, you often get a closer encounter with nature that you simply wouldn't get from driving...the sights, smells, and sounds.

My daily route took me along Loop 499, passing Hugh Ramsey Nature Park and over the Arroyo Colorado. Having looked out over the nature park, what a sight it was to see the huisache in full bloom along those banks! Oh, and what a pleasant fragrance that filled the air! I made it a point then to visit Hugh Ramsey Nature Park to see the trees up close. I also recall the wonder in seeing a flowering coral bean for the first time. It was then, after seeing the other native flora in bloom, that I delved into learning about native plants of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. The rest, as they say, is history.



Huisache tree in full bloom

I now volunteer frequently at the same nature park and am currently training to be a Texas Master Naturalist (Class of 2023), reviving a long-held passion for wildlife and finding appreciation for our region's unique ecosystem. As a full year comes around, the huisache blooms are yet again bursting into the color of a rising sun, saying farewell to those cold winter days and embracing the warming Texas heat.

I have learned so much since discovering the beauty of huisache, and yet, I still have far more to learn and appreciate. While it's not ideal for me to plant a huisache on my property, go for it if you can! I am enjoying another season of its blooms each day I ride past Hugh Ramsey Nature Park. Even the name, huisache, evokes some deeper appreciation...a Nahuatl word, a simple connection to a shared ancestry with the indigenous tribes who inhabited deep South Texas centuries before. I wonder their reaction to the huisache, and the possible eagerness they may have felt at the calling of spring. What trees now grow, I hope to help preserve for the next generations to enjoy and to hear them say "We saw the trees of gold!"