



A CONSERVATION NOTEBOOK

by Homer Stevens

For years it has been my opinion and observation that the Hackberry is the sorriest, biggest weed in existence. They have taken the wide reaching shallow root system adaptation that characterizes cedar, cypress, Live oak, and many of our native Hill Country trees to a new level. My garden used to grow short on the East and West, and obviously normally productive and tall in the middle with the rows running East to West. This being because there were several very tall Hackberry trees on the East and West ends.

Not only did their height shade the ends, but the roots extended out nearly 70 feet from the base of the trees robbing water and nutrients from the first plants in the vegetable rows. My wife can testify first hand as to the size of the shallow roots after tripping over one of them and incurring a rather large dental bill. This incident prompted the cutting down of all of those trees on the East, and the next growing season the effect on the garden production was immediately obvious. All of the small garden plants are now only on the West. We'll get our chain saws going again this spring. Like any other weed, Hackberries tend to come up everywhere they are not wanted.

Viewing these experiences and observations, you can imagine my thinking when one of the presenters at my Master Naturalists class named the Hackberry as her favorite tree. This lady included in her resume botanist, author, and college professor. Her subject was entitled Ethnobotany, which by web definition is "the study of the relationships that exist between people and plants." Only in the world of collegiate academia could such a definition be conjured and elevated to significance. As the professor continued on, it turned out that her topic was oriented to informing us about edible plants. The Hackberry is considered to be a "very important wildlife plant, particularly for birds because the fruit matures in late fall and is very high in lipids (fats). Leaves are browsed by deer and also provide larval food for but-

terflies. Part of the lesson also indicated that if you were ever in dire need of food, the berries might be considered a food source. After contemplating these facts, I remembered that my father who sometimes trapped raccoons, ring-tails, and even foxes would often set his traps at the base of Hackberry trees because he knew that the varmints came there to eat the berries, and baiting was not necessary. This was at a time some years back when pelts could be sold for a profit.

It seems to be a recurring fact in these stories that before declaring anything positively good or bad, all the conditions need to be considered and investigated. In the garden Hackberry trees are a humongous weed. (Weeds are defined as any plant out of place). They should not be planted closer than fifty feet from a house because the roots will actually extend out and become large enough to damage the foundation. Since they grow very rapidly, the limbs frequently become weak may split and damage structures underneath.



In spite of the mentioned drawbacks, they can be an attractive source of shade and grow much faster than many of our other primary shade trees. In a native plant mix such as many of our pastures their value to wildlife should not be denied.

Here on the Farm there are a number of Hackberry trees that are important sources of shade for several of our RV sites. Even in these instances the above ground roots are a nuisance when mowing.