

Carolina Buckthorn – Reprinted from Friends of Hagerman NWR Weekly Blog, May 4, 2017 (by Donna Rogers)

Carolina buckthorn, a member of the family Rhamnaceae (Buckthorn family), is also known as Yellow buckthorn or Indian cherry. This plant was discovered in South Carolina, hence the common and Latin species names, but it is also native to parts of Texas, including our north Texas Blackland prairie. The Carolina buckthorn's native habitat is bottomlands, stream banks, and woods, and it thrives best in part shade in moist, chalky, and rocky soils. It can, however, stand attractively alone in full sun or works well as an understory tree if it can get three to four hours of sun each day. Even though its name contains the word thorn, this native perennial is without spines. It is one of the most attractive ornamental trees available and a wildlife-friendly choice.



Grown as a small tree or large shrub, the Carolina buckthorn grows slowly to heights of 12-15 feet but can grow as high as 25 feet. It has shiny, oval leaves that are bright green on top and slightly paler underneath. The leaves stay green into late fall when they begin a show of yellow to bronze. Although deciduous, some of the leaves hold on through February. Its leaves are usually three to five inches long with a few fine, widely spaced, rounded teeth and prominent veins, especially on the underside. The flowers are small and bell-shaped and form as yellowish or yellow-greenish small clusters at the base of the leaves. The Carolina buckthorn flowers in May and June and attracts many pollinators, then in the late fall it produces a fleshy red berry, about 1/4 inch or more in diameter, that turns purplish-black when ripe. The fruit clusters are so pretty that they can be used as part of Thanksgiving or Christmas decorations.



Plant diversity in the landscape encourages a healthy, sustaining habitat for wildlife, and the Carolina buckthorn helps do just that. The ripe berries of this buckthorn attract butterflies, and the tree serves as the larval host to the American snout (shown below, Photo credit: www.butterflygardening.com), gray hairstreak, spring azure, and painted lady butterflies. Many bird species, especially mockingbirds, catbirds, and brown thrashers, and other wildlife also consume these buckthorn berries, which are toxic to humans. Deer have also been known to nibble on the leaves and bark.



Carolina buckthorn are easily propagated by seed, but semi-hardwood cuttings taken in late summer or dormant hardwood cuttings will root. Seeds can be collected in the fall after the fruits have turned dark purple but are also available commercially. This plant should be watered immediately after planting and every other week during its first growing season but should become drought tolerant thereafter.

Upon a visit to the butterfly garden at Hagerman National Wildlife Refuge, Carolina buckthorn may be found just south of the water feature in the dry creek bed area.

References:

<http://www.wildflower.org>

<https://npsot.org>

<http://dendro.cnre.vt.edu>

http://npsot.org/wp/boerne/files/2013/12/Carolina-Buckthorn_Feb.20141.pdf

Photo credits: U of FL, JimBotany.com, namethatplant.net, Hagerman NWR