

Acacia greggii Gray
FABACEAE

catclaw acacia

Synonyms: *Senegalia greggii* (Gray) Britt. & Rose.

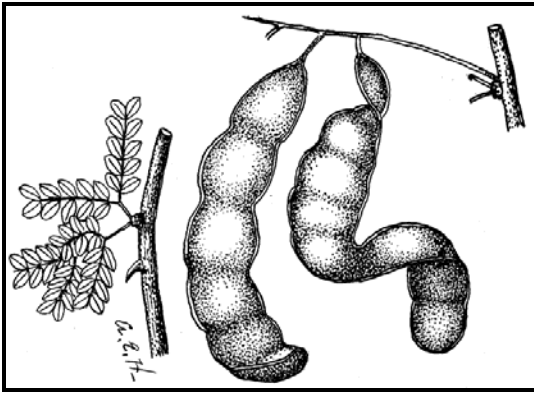


Illustration source: USDA—Forest Service collection, Hunt Institute

General Description.—*Acacia greggii* is commonly known as catclaw acacia, catclaw, Texas mimosa, tearblanket, una de gato and wait-a-while (Epple 1995). Children sometimes call the plant “Frito” because the wide, flat fruits twist and curl like corn chips. Many of the common names are similar to those applied to *Mimosa aculeaticarpa* var. *biuncifera* which it superficially resembles. The genus name, *Acacia*, is derived from “akis” that means “thorn” in Greek (Gledhill 1992). Catclaw acacia is a deciduous shrub, or small tree, with grayish-green bipinnately compound leaves that are up to 7.6 cm long. Catclaw acacia exhibits foliage dimorphism (Isely 1973). The leaves clustered on spurs are small, very short petioled, and usually have one to two pairs of pinnae whereas the foliage on new growth is larger with petioles up to 1 cm long and with one to three pairs of pinnae. The short, sharp, curved spines on the branches are approximately 0.64 cm long and resemble cats’ claws (Epple 1995). Two varieties exist, var. *greggii* and var. *wrightii* (Kartesz 1994). *Acacia greggii* var. *greggii* is synonymous with *A. greggii* var. *arizonica* Isely; *A. greggii* var. *wrightii* (Benth.) Isely, is synonymous with *A. wrightii* Benth. (Kartesz 1994). Variety *wrightii* can be distinguished from var. *greggii* by its wider legume and larger leaflets.

Range.—Catclaw acacia grows in New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, southern Utah, southern Colorado, southern California, and Texas, and

southwards into the Mexican states of Coahuila, Chihuahua, Sonora, and Baja California. Variety *greggii* is the most widespread. Variety *wrightii* grows in parts of western Texas and New Mexico and in Sonora, Tamaulipas, and Nuevo León, Mexico.

Ecology.—Catclaw acacia is a drought resistant, deep-rooted plant that grows between 300 m and 1,500 m in elevation in a variety of communities and soil types, from sandy or gravelly hills and slopes, to canyon bottoms and along washes and streams (Dayton 1931, McAuliffe 1995, Richardson 1995, Vines 1960). Although most commonly a 1- to 4-m tall shrub, it can grow to an 8- to 10-m tall tree, especially in deep, rich soils (USDAFS 1988). It is a frequent member of desert grasslands and is often associated with other acacia species and a variety of other shrubs (Taylor and others 1997). It is not typically a dominant member of the community but may reach co-dominance in washes (Schmutz and others 1992, Uchytel 1990). Catclaw acacia is more cold tolerant than many acacia species (Bowers 1993). However, in the northern part of its range it generally grows no taller than 2 m whereas in its southern range it will grow to nearly 7 m. Catclaw acacia is a winter-deciduous shrub that grows only when leafy, remaining dormant in the winter and early spring (McClaran 1995). Observations suggest that it is a common host to mistletoe. An ornithological study in Nevada noted that 67 percent of the catclaw acacia shrubs distributed along three 1-km transects were infested with large amounts of mistletoe, *Phorodendron californicum* Nutt. (Blake 1984).

Reproduction.—Catclaw acacia flowers from April through October with the heaviest blooms in April and May (Epple 1995, Everitt and Drawe 1993). Variety *wrightii* flowers as early as March (Vines 1960). Rain frequently prompts flowering. The creamy-yellow, fragrant flowers are insect pollinated (Bowers 1993). The fruit is a light brown to reddish legume often becoming constricted between the seeds. The circular seeds are 5- to 7-mm in diameter (Isely 1973). The wax-coated seeds delay germination for several years and need to be scarified to germinate (Bowers

1993, Epple 1995). Regions where catclaw acacia grows are prone to flash floods and the tumbling action of floodwaters in sandy, gravelly washes accomplish both seed scarification and seed dispersal (Bowers 1993).

Growth and Management.—Catclaw acacia is a thicket-forming shrub that has increased in abundance throughout the Southwestern United States since the 1890s (Bahre 1995). This increase is likely influenced if not directly caused by livestock overgrazing and fire suppression (Bahre 1995). Overgrazing has reduced native perennial grasses that, when healthy and dense, can reduce woody shrub seedling establishment and also provide sufficient fuel to carry a fire. Catclaw is susceptible to fire when young, but mature plants re-sprout from the root crown following fire (Carmichael and others 1978, McPherson 1995). Catclaw is moderately resistant to phenoxy herbicides, and after only one application the shrubs tend to re-foliate or re-sprout from the crown (Hibbert and others 1974). Successive herbicide applications kill the plants. Apparently the invasive resinbrush, *Euryops multifidus* (Thunb.) DC. out-competes, or is in some other way deleterious to, catclaw shrubs and may be a threat in some parts of its range (McAuliffe 1995).

Benefits.—Catclaw acacia shrubs provide protective cover and shade for wildlife (Dayton 1931). Pods, twigs and foliage, especially new growth, provides browse for a variety of wildlife, for example jack rabbit, white-tailed and mule deer, and the seeds are eaten by many species of small mammals and birds, for example, ground squirrels, western white-winged dove, scaled and bobwhite quail (Graham 1941, Everitt and Drawe 1993, Taylor and others 1997). The leaves contain 16 to 20 percent crude protein (Everitt and Drawe 1993). Cattle browse the shrubs especially early in the spring before the new leaves appear, when the young green twigs provide some relatively succulent forage for a short period of time, and when other forage is limited (Graham 1941, USDAFS 1988). The mature foliage and pods are unpalatable to livestock (Graham 1941, Vines 1960). The fruits were ground into a flour, or meal, called pinole by Native Americans (Epple 1995, Vines 1960). It is a food plant for both adult and larval butterflies (Taylor and others 1997) and an important “bee plant” (Dayton 1931). The lac insect, *Tachardia lacca*, feeds on the sap of catclaw acacia and produces a resinous substance that can be used in making varnish and shellac but

probably not in commercial quantities (Powell 1998). The wood has been used for fuel and tool handles (Epple 1995). It is also in the ornamental and landscape trade and is a good hedge plant (Taylor and others 1997). It has been used in projects to re-vegetate degraded land but is sensitive to some pollutants such as those found in copper mine wastes (Norem and others 1982).

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