

Mountain Laurel's Secret: Mescal Beans

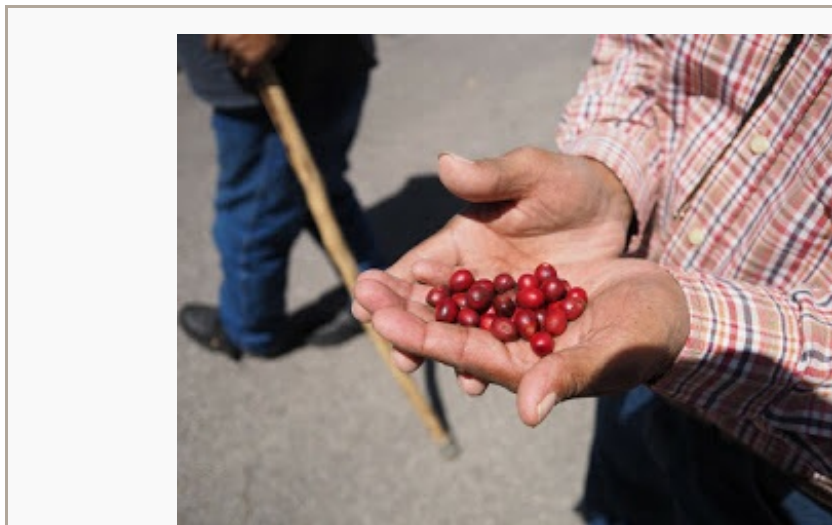
 txcompost.blogspot.com/2017/10/mescal-beans.html

This is an expanded post of my history article for the November 2017 issue of the Northwest Austin Civic Association newsletter ([NWACA newsletter](#))

Once a year the Texas Military Department, TxDOT and Texas Parks and Wildlife conduct government to government consultations with federally recognized tribal nations in Texas and the surrounding states. The goal is to seek an agreement as to how to identify, consider, and manage properties that still belong to, or are historically significant to, those tribal nations.

In August, 2017, the meeting was held here in the neighborhood (Northwest Hills) at the Double Tree Hilton on Business Park Drive and I had the good fortune of speaking as the representative of the Travis County Historical Commission. During a break, I got into a

conversation with the two representatives from the Comanche Nation; we talked about the recent visit, April this year, by the Elder Council to Austin, and they asked about the abundance of mescal beans in Austin (apparently rare in Oklahoma)



Member of Comanche Nation Elder Council collecting mescal beans while in Austin, 2017

When the Comanche Elder Council visited Austin earlier this year I noticed many busily picking up little red beans off the ground. These little red beans come from a plant that probably most in the neighborhood, myself included, simply take for granted: mountain laurel. The pods that grow on mountain laurel contain a red bean that Native Americans call “mescal beans” (No relation to mescal the alcoholic beverage, similar to tequila, made from agave plants).

My first “experience” with mountain laurel came when my daughter, now 30, was in day care at My Friend’s House, part of Northwest Hills United Methodist Church here in the neighborhood. One spring, while the mountain laurel was in bloom, she decided if it tastes as good as it smells (very sweet), she was going to give it a try and ate a few flower blooms, got very ill and threw it all up.

As it turns out, it was lucky my daughter chose to eat the flower blooms rather than the mescal beans. A word of caution to parents and teachers: the red mescal bean can be lethal, especially if eaten by a child, and once you are aware of their existence, you will notice they are everywhere in our neighborhood!

The mescal bean has a long history with Native Americans and are found in archeological sites in Texas dating back over 6,000 years. While used for adornment (necklaces, bracelets) and as rattles while still in the pod (e.g. for ceremonial dances), it was the bean’s physiological effect that likely made it powerful medicine, figuratively and perhaps literally.

Paraphrasing from the website Texas Beyond History, the many physiological effects of mescal bean intoxication include muscle paralysis, nausea, vomiting, evacuation of the bowels, seeing red, unconsciousness, and even possible death. While not hallucinogenic, its overall effects helped one reach a state in which to receive visions. Because of its extreme physiological effects, the mountain laurel tree, or at least its seed, was likely viewed by

Native Americans as a powerful plant worthy of trade and of decorating ritual clothing.

Not confined to prehistoric times, the ceremonial use of mescal beans continued into the 19th century among many tribes, often in conjunction with the peyote ceremony. Indeed, based on the interest expressed by members of the Comanche Nation I have met, it continues to play an important role in their culture.

In my November 2016 issue of the newsletter, "It's All Balcones Fault", I talked about the abundance of natural resources created by the Balcones Fault that first drew Native Americans to these hills. I now understand that mescal beans were yet another of those natural resources. So, the next time you see a mountain laurel in the neighborhood, know that you are looking at a part of our neighborhood's history and what made it a special place to the Native Americans that called this home before us.

P.S. And don't eat the pretty red beans!

References

Texas Beyond History Article, Mountain Laurel, Mescalbean

<https://www.texasbeyondhistory.net/ethnobot/images/mountain-laurel.html>, retrieved 10/1/2017

Comanche Nation Elder Council Visit to Austin, <http://txcompost.blogspot.com/2017/05/comanche-nation-elder-council-visit-to.html>, retrieved 10/12/2017

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