

The Pinyon Pine

Thousands of Americans eat pine tree seeds. As much as eight million pounds of the nut-like seeds of the pinyon pine have been shipped from our Southwest in one year. The nut is rich and tasty.

Actually there is nothing new about the eating of pinyon nuts, Indian nuts—pinones (pronounced peen-youn-ees), as the Mexicans call them. In Europe the seed of the pinyon, or stone pine, has been eaten since time immemorial. There the nut is called pignolia.



Pinyon Pine
©1952 National Wildlife Federation

The early Spanish explorer Cabeza de Baca found the Indian using pounded nuts for flour. He considered the New World pinyon nuts better than those of Spain. Today dark-eyed children of Mexican extraction sell little bags of pinones to passing motorists.

Many wild creatures also have found that the nuts are good eating, according to the National Wildlife Federation. Turkeys and band-tailed pigeons fatten on them. They provide 71% of the food of the beautiful white-headed

woodpecker. The pinyon jay got its name because it feeds so extensively upon the seeds of this tree. Numerous rodents, which in turn become food for larger animals, rely upon them.

Surprisingly, the scrubby, misshapen, unpretentious pinyon pine played a major role in the development of our great Southwest. It is the common evergreen seen with junipers (cedars) in scattered, open growth between the desert and the tall timber of New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Colorado and California and is generally considered by travelers to be rather picturesque but worthless weed tree. It is so important today, however, and has played so prominent a part in history, that both New Mexico and Arizona have declared it their state tree.

Early settlers found that it made a hot fire and was invaluable for cooking and heating. Together with the juniper it served for building ranch houses, fences and corrals. The diminutive pine was cut for props in the mines and cross-ties for the early railroads. It still the Christmas tree of the Spanish-speaking people and the decoration for special occasions. The fragrant cones, 1½ to 2 inches long, are used commercially to produce incense.

The pinwon pine (pinus edulis) has a short bole and is usually un-

der 20 feet tall. It is recognized by its stiff, short, dark green needles ¾ to 1½ inches long, two to the cluster. A single-leaf pinyon (pinus monophylla) occupies the western part of the range.

Originally, valuable range grasses grew among the scattered junipers and pinyon pines. In large areas now, as a result of overgrazing, the grasses have given way to weeds, the trees have been cut for man's use or torn out by bulldozers to make room for more forage. Soil erosion is ruining the land. The National Wildlife Federation cautions that the value of the pinyon pine as shelter for soil, for livestock, for range grasses may not yet have been thoroughly assessed. It grows very slowly, they say. Let us not lose this honored, picturesque and valuable citizen

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