



Good for the Earth, Good for People, Good for Communities

Mesquite Harvesting Guide

Mesquite (*Prosopis sp.*) is a legume that was a traditional staple among indigenous peoples of the southwestern desert. The 6 to 8 inch long beans are high in protein, carbohydrates, fiber, and minerals. Mature pods can be dried and ground into a sweet, nutritious meal or flour in a hammer mill. Although mesquite meal is naturally sweet, it is also extremely effective in controlling blood sugar levels in people with diabetes. Mesquite flour can be substituted for part of the other flour and part of the sweetening used in any baked good to make it healthier. Mesquite flour can also be used to season and coat meats before browning or as protein powder for smoothies.

Harvesting Mesquite Pods

Mesquite pods may ripen anytime over the summer, depending on conditions, and there is usually a second bloom, so they can be picked from late June through October. Ripe pods are usually tan to red in color, and often mottled. Pods are ready to harvest when they are brittle, the seeds inside rattle, and they come off the tree easily. Hard pulling indicates that pods are unripe. Avoid pods that appear to have fungal growth on the outside. Also avoid picking pods off the ground due to possible bacterial and fungal contamination. Please note that pods will fall off the tree easily when they are ripe, so it takes some vigilance to keep track of them to ensure you harvest before this occurs. Holding a large, shallow cardboard produce box under bunches of ripe pods can make harvesting more efficient.

Quality pods can be found in washes, city parks, backyards, and along low-traffic streets where they are likely to receive supplemental water or run-off and have not been in contact with pollutants. Once you have found a tree you want to pick from (look for large, filled out pods), taste one of the pods as the sweetness and flavor varies widely from one tree to the next. Pods from the Honey Mesquite tend to be sweeter, however Velvet Mesquite is the predominant species.

Drying Mesquite Pods

After harvesting, rinse pods, if desired, by dunking them in a pail of water and swishing them around. Place them in the sun for several days to dry thoroughly until they are brittle. The pods are dry when they snap in two rather than bending. For large quantities, place pods on wire mesh over sheets of tin roofing.

Bruchid beetles will likely hatch out of the pods during drying and storage, but this is not something to cause alarm since they are harmless. To avoid hatching beetles (and to dry pods quickly without having to take them inside when monsoons threaten) the recommended technique is to kill the eggs by pasteurizing the pods at low temperatures (215 degree F) in a regular oven or, preferably, a solar oven. Heat pods for 20 to 30 minutes until there is no trace of moisture when the oven door is opened. Take care in a high temp solar oven to either position the oven away from the sun to ensure low temps or remove them promptly once they smell toasty and before they start to brown.

Storing Mesquite Pods

Store pods in a dry, rodent-free place until milling day. It is important that pods are **absolutely brittle dry** when they are brought in for milling. Pasteurized pods can be stored in buckets with airtight lids and will remain totally bug-free. Large quantities of sun-dried pods can be stored in clean garbage cans and buckets with lids or in closed paper or cloth bags. A few days before the milling, separate pods from any bugs

collected at the bottom, and place them in the sun for their final drying. Also ensure that pods are totally free of dirt, debris, and especially small stones (to avoid serious damage to the hammer mill).

Milling Mesquite Pods

Mesquite meal was traditionally ground with stone implements due to the rock hard seeds and fibrous pods. Modern mills make the work much easier. Hammer mills use “hammers” to rapidly pulverize the entire pod into flour. The pods are high in sugar so they will quickly gum up grinding type mills and shorten the life of home blenders. Millings are scheduled in the dry months after the high dew point of the summer monsoon season since dry mesquite pods are hygroscopic and will reabsorb some of the atmospheric moisture.

Five gallons of mesquite pods makes approximately one gallon (five pounds) of meal, depending on how tightly the pods are packed. Mesquite meal retails at approximately \$15 a pound.

Annual Community Mesquite Millings have been held at the Bisbee Farmers Market, Cascabel Community Center, and various locations in Tucson for many years. Baja Arizona Sustainable Agriculture purchased its own hammer mill last year, so more millings will be scheduled in Cochise County and elsewhere. See Milling dates and information below. There is a \$5 minimum charge and limit of 15 gallons of pods per family at most community millings.

Summary

Harvesting:

- Pick pods when they are tan to red, the seeds inside rattle, and they pull off the tree easily
- Don't pick pods with fungal growth or black mold
- Don't collect pods off of the ground

Drying:

- Dry pods outside or in an oven until they are brittle and snap in half easily

Storing:

- Store pods in a dry, rodent-free place
- A few days before milling the pods, re-dry them and remove any bugs, dirt, or debris

For More Information

- www.desertharvesters.org – hammermill rentals, milling dates, and extensive harvesting info
- www.omick.net – desert foods harvesting tips & recipes under the Native Desert Foods section
- www.bajaaz.org – for milling dates on calendar