

Texas Madrone (Arbutus xalapensis)

The Texas Madrone (*Arbutus xalapensis*) has been called “the Sacred Tree of the Hill Country”, growing in isolated colonies throughout the Edwards Plateau and Trans-Pecos mountains. After flowering in early Spring, their cinnamon-brown bark peels in June, revealing the cream to light green to pink new bark beneath that gives them the name Lady’s Legs and Naked Indians, although they date to Ancient times prior to either ladies or native Americans. Bright red-orange fruit in the Fall provides a brilliant accent on the hills as well as food for birds and animals.

Though striking and beautiful, they are difficult so far to cultivate, transplant and grow. The present Hill Country is probably a bit different from the Madrone’s original environment. Extremely sensitive roots and a possible mycorrhizal symbiosis with their plant allies and soil present even more difficult conditions.

First: If you plan on keeping them in the fiber pot, water when they feel dry and light, about every 36 hours unless it rains. Deep water.

Do not plant outside of its native range— the Trans-Pecos mountains and the Edwards Plateau/Hill Country. They live here for a reason. In the Hill Country, hard rock alternates with softer caliche along ridges where Madrones grow. Our infrequent rains drip thru the caliche, pooling along the harder stone, then tapped by Madrones. Too much water, which many people understandably supply, invites root disease compounded by a reduced ability to quickly create new roots. The idea is to convince them to search for and find water down in the land. Your primary considerations are site and drainage.

Site: Find a shady understory environment facing east or north to protect from strong afternoon sunlight, preferably on a slightly-angled slope for drainage. They will grow out of the understory eventually but require cool, indirect light to begin. A nearby oak or cedar/juniper provides leaf litter that helps with water retention; provide shade and offer protection from browsing deer.

Drainage: Dig the hole twice as deep and twice as wide as the pot. Save the soil which comes out and mix with humus. Next, pour a gallon of water into the hole. Watch for 20-30 minutes. You are hoping the water will not stand, but will start draining into the land, to seek out pooled water below and trace this trail through the ground for the Madrone’s roots. **If the water doesn’t drain in an hour, find another site.** You can use a rock bar on solid rock slabs if close to your surface, but you are watching to see how quickly the Madrone roots will have to run to properly establish. Put medium-size native rocks in the bottom to help aerate. If the plant is in a decomposable pot *Do Not Remove It* just make small cuts in the bottom to allow roots and water to find a way out. *Avoid handling the roots at all if possible!* Backfill the hole with your half-native/half-humus soil mix. Rocks around the top after planting protects from armadillos and other rooters and diggers.

Care: Sprinkler systems are not a good idea for Madrones. They create a lazy, soft tree whose roots stay high in the ground, especially with a richer soil. Watering a gallon a week if there is no rain is usually enough, but that depends on the site and weather. Again, you are training the roots to search for themselves and establish deep.

Only lightly fertilize in the Spring once you see them break new growth. An organic 3-5-2 will work. They are very ascetic; once established, their roots find what they need.

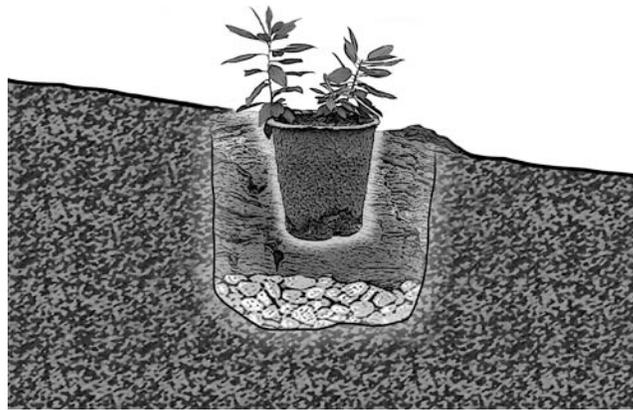
Growth: They grow very slowly in the Hill Country, a function of water, but when they tap into an aquifer or water pool, can annually grow (rarely) 12-18 inches, although they won't do this year after year.

Keep them moist but not soggy, and dry before watering. They have minimal or no root hairs, making them especially sensitive to drying out. Symptoms of too much water appear the same as not enough water— wilting with a grayish color.

Dark spots on leaves, especially during Spring or Fall rains when the weather's cooler, are normal.

Leaf-droop in nature occurs right after flowering, and they appear to be wilting. This is normal. While Madrones tapped into a good ground water source will keep all their leaves, when the weather's too dry, they drop lower ones. They are often classified as semi-deciduous.

Deer? Of course, they devour anything. Small Madrones need to be protected from browsing by deer, goats, horses and cattle. Deer will browse even older trees over 10-feet tall. They browse at the 4-foot level, but with good rains the branches can re-leaf.



Information appreciatively provided by:

The Madrone Way

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