Chamizal

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
Chamizal National Memorial

Common Trees of the Chihuahuan Desert

Known more for its vibrant, borderland culture than its vegetation, El Paso (and specifically Chamizal National Memorial) actually has several types of trees. All of the trees highlighted below are common to the El Paso area. Like desert wildlife and cacti, these trees have found ways to adapt to this hot, dry environment.

Live Oak
Quercus virginiana

Most oak trees are deciduous, which means that they lose their leaves every fall. But the live oak keeps its leaves year-round—it's an evergreen. This type of oak is relatively small in size and can often be low-growing like a bush. The live oak does not require much water and can grow in poor soils. The acorns it produces are a staple food source for the urban wildlife of Chamizal National Memorial—birds and squirrels. Past hunter and gatherer societies ground the acorns into flour. Today, live oaks shade us from the summer sun and beautify our cities. Oak wood is used to make kitchen and dining room tables, as well as bedroom furniture.

Vitex
Vitex agnus-castus

Native to areas of southern Europe and western Asia, the vitex tree is grown in many gardens. The vitex resembles and smells like a lavender bush. It is drought resistant and can grow in sun or shade, making it an easy-to-grow tree. Branched flower clusters bloom in late spring on the newest branches of the tree. The flowers are followed by berries. The vitex has been medicinally used in a variety of ways for over 2,500 years.

Mondell Pine
Pinus eldarica

A native tree of the Middle East, the Mondell pine, also known as the Afghan pine, is especially well suited for living in hot, dry places like El Paso. It can withstand long periods of drought, grows well in full sun, can endure constantly heavy winds, is generally resistant to pests, and it is not invasive like many other nonnative species of plants. The Mondell pine is commonly used as a wind breaker and city beautifier. This is the only coniferous (needle and cone bearing) tree within the memorial.

Don't break my branch! A tree branch takes years to grow, but you could destroy it in only a second. Please remember that tree climbing and hanging piñatas are prohibited within Chamizal National Memorial.

Honey Mesquite
Prosopis glandulosa

If you like to barbeque, then the word *mesquite* may ring a bell. Mesquite is an ingredient found in many barbeque briquettes, and its smoke gives your steak or baby back ribs a distinct flavor. The honey mesquite is native to the U.S.–Mexico border region and is a relatively small tree. It releases nitrogen into the soil. Nitrogen maintains soil health and is a prerequisite for farmers in maintaining soil fertility. A member of the legume family, wild animals eat the bean pods that are produced by the honey mesquite.

Desert Willow
Chilopsis linearis

The desert willow is a highly specialized desert plant that adds a splash of color to the El Paso landscape. The thin, waxy leaves protect the tree from losing too much moisture in this arid climate. The tree will drop leaves in times of drought and will remain dormant until the next rain. American Indians used the leaves of the desert willow for baskets and the bark for shirts and nets. The orchid-like flowers were used to treat coughs. The wood was used for fuel and building material.

Mexican Palo Verde
Parkinsonia aculeata

In Mexico, it is known as *lluvia de oro*, which is Spanish for "gold rain." Indeed, the Mexican palo verde produces bright yellow flowers from April to August. The palo verde is a small tree, rarely growing above 20 feet high. Its branches are green and twig-like, hence the name palo verde (green stick). Native to the U.S.–Mexico borderland and especially common in the Sonoran Desert of Arizona, the Mexican palo verde grows naturally in desert washes. Because it does not require much water and can live in full sun, the City of El Paso has planted these trees in many of its parks. Be careful when viewing the palo verde because it has camouflaged thick thorns that are insensitive to human skin.

Cottonwood
Populus sp.

"Remember the Alamo," Texans cried. Did you know that *alamo* is Spanish for cottonwood? Chamizal National Memorial and the surrounding area actually have two species of native cottonwoods: the Rio Grande cottonwood (*Populus deltoides*) and the Fremont cottonwood (*Populus fremontii*). All cottonwoods grow where water is abundant, such as near natural springs, along the banks of the Rio Grande, in dried creek-beds where the water table lies just below the surface, and where humans water the tree, like at Chamizal National Memorial. But humans need water as well. The Rio Grande has been dammed in several spots. Since the vast majority of its water is now used by people, the river is meager. As the Rio Grande's riparian ecosystem has diminished in size, cottonwoods that were once naturally well watered are now unnaturally dry.

Trees and Global Warming

Did you know that trees are givers of life? Aside from giving us oxygen, trees absorb carbon dioxide, a harmful greenhouse gas that, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, is "very likely causing the increase in globally averaged temperatures since the mid-20th century." Unfortunately, deforestation, wildland fires, and urban growth reduces the number of trees and releases carbon dioxide back into our communal atmosphere. In his book entitled "Hot, Flat, and Crowded," Thomas Friedman claims that deforestation alone is causing more global warming than all the cars on the roads of the world combined. Fortunately, national parks, like Chamizal National Memorial, work to maintain healthy forest and natural landscapes. In protecting trees, national parks protect the life support system for both plants and animals.