

The Rio Grande and Fremont Cottonwoods



The Rio Grande cottonwood grows near water, and in places where its roots reach moist soil, in the lower stream valleys, from 4000 to 7000 feet or so in elevation, near the lower limit of the Narrowleaf cottonwood range, along the Colorado, San Juan, Yampa, White, and Gunnison Rivers; in the southwestern corner of Colorado; and near the old native and Spanish settlements along the Rio Grande in Colorado and New Mexico. It is very similar to the Plains cottonwood except in small details.

These cottonwoods grow 50 to 90 feet high with a thick trunk up to 4 or more feet in diameter. A Rio Grande cottonwood growing in Ruby Canyon on the Colorado River at the Utah border was 207 years old when it was measured in 1995, a very old age for a cottonwood, and it was still alive.

The Rio Grande cottonwood, with botanical name *Populus deltoides* H. Marshall subsp. *wislizenii* (S. Watson) Eckenwalder, was sometimes called the Valley cottonwood or the Wislizenus cottonwood.

The botanical name is for Frederick Aldolphus Wislizenus, a German physician and plant collector who traveled in Colorado in 1839 and in New Mexico and Mexico in 1846 and 1847. In the Spanish settlements of the southwestern U.S. the cottonwood was known by the name Alamo, and a cottonwood tree gave the name to the famous mission of San Antonio, Texas.

Indians ate the raw catkins (flower spikes) of this tree, and made baskets from young cottonwood shoots. The vegas or roof beams of adobe houses sometimes are made from the trunks, as was early furniture. The foliage is browsed by mule deer and horses, and presumably beavers eat the leaves and bark, and use stems for building. Cottonwood was of course were burned in the campfires of Indians, explorers and ranchmen, and in the cabins and camps of settlers and prospectors of the old west.

The leaf blade is a broad triangle usually 2 to 4 inches long and 2 to 3 inches wide; coarsely toothed with usually fewer than 10 teeth per side -- the Plains cottonwood leaf usually has more than 10 teeth per side -- with a narrow, tapering drawn-out point. Leaf stalks are about two inches long and flattened. The flattened leaf stalks allow the leaves to sway back and forth in any breeze.

The bark is quite similar to Plains cottonwood bark: on mature trees, the bark is light gray to pale brown, with flat-topped ridges bisected by v-shaped vertical grooves, which can be an inch or more deep.

A similar tree the Fremont cottonwood grows along rivers of the southwest and California. According

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to the Forest Services' s *Fire Effects Information System*, “Fremont cottonwood does not occur in Colorado. Cottonwoods previously misidentified there as Fremont cottonwood have been reassigned as Rio Grande cottonwood.” The Fremont cottonwood has more than 10 teeth on each leaf side and other differences.

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