

# THE BIG NEWS

Happenings in the World of Texas Champion Trees

Summer 2007

## What's in a Name?

Shakespeare's Juliet would have made a poor taxonomist, after famously professing not to care about family names. But when we're talking trees – especially champion trees – knowing what to call the tree you're looking at can make the difference between a new champ and an also-ran! Since *American Forests* published the first *National Register of Big Trees* in 1941, one document has served as the source of official common and scientific names for all species in the U.S. recognized as a kind of tree: Elbert Little's *Checklist of United States Trees*, last updated in 1979.

Since then, there has been much discussion at the national level about updating Little's text in order to include additional species and to simply update the common and scientific names to current standards and usage. *American Forests* plans to issue a new national list to go into effect in 2008, but in Texas we decided to get a head start. With the latest quarterly edition of the Texas Big Tree Registry, we have updated all scientific names and most common names to conform to the Integrated Taxonomic Information System (ITIS) (found at <http://www.itis.gov/>) and the USDA's PLANTS database (<http://plants.usda.gov/>). Both systems are fairly consistent in terms of nomenclature, with a couple of exceptions. The complete list of "old" and "new" names can be found on the TFS big tree web page, at <http://texasforests.tamu.edu/>

It does seem as though taxonomists have been busier than the proverbial one-armed paperhanger. Our new Texas list adds 25 species and subtracts one, bringing the total number of recognized tree species to 319. But the biggest adjustment will be what we call them. Some have new Latin species names (mockernut hickory is ***Carya alba*** instead of *C. tomentosa*) and many have new common names or common name spellings (Berlandier ash is now **Mexican ash**). Some species have been demoted to varieties (sugarberry is now *Celtis laevigata* **var. laevigata**), while some varieties have been elevated to subspecies (eastern cottonwood is now *Populus deltoides* **ssp. deltoides** instead of **var. deltoides**) or even full species status (Texas oak was *Quercus shumardii* **var. texana** and is now ***Q. buckleyi***).

Most challenging of all will be learning entirely new genus and species names for several common trees: the genus *Bumelia* is now *Sideroxylon*, so gum bumelia (*Bumelia lanuginosa*) becomes **gum bully (*Sideroxylon lanuginosum*)** and tallowtree (*Sapium sebiferum*) becomes (***Triadica sebifera***). At the genus level, *Myrica* switches to ***Morella*** (the waxmyrtles) and *Rhamnus* is now ***Frangula*** (the buckthorns). Proving taxonomists don't always stick to this pattern, the two Texas species formerly in *Pithecellobium* – Texas ebony (*P. flexicaule*) and huajillo (*P. pallens*) – are now known as ***Ebenopsis ebano*** and ***Havardia pallens***, respectively.

So while we may have learned in school that Latin was a "dead" language, taxonomists continue to revive it and put it to work to describe the world around us. With advances in genetic sequencing, it's likely we will see plenty of other changes to our list over time, even if the trees themselves don't!

## Quarterly List Published

Here's a snapshot of the new champs or co-champs crowned in the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter of 2007:

Species	Cir.	Height	Spread	Tree Index	County	Owner
Birch, river	98	80	66	195	Red River	David Rolen
Elm, winged	150	78	100	253	Bowie	Larry Stinson
Walnut, black	171	77	117	277	Bowie	Larry Stinson

## In Memorium

"*The king is dead...long live the king!*" is the cry of royal succession, indicating an unbroken lineage to the British throne. The same is often true for champion trees, as in the case of winged elm (*Ulmus alata*): Larry Stinson's tree in Bowie County is a new champ only because the Leon County champ in Centerville had been removed by the owner following years of decline.