

# Nature Notes

...from Sharon

While patrolling the trail along the east estuary at Barefoot Beach Preserve a couple of weeks ago, I noticed some unusual spiral pods near the beginning of the trail. Farther south, there were more--along with an identification post saying it was Cat Claw (*Pithecellobium unguis-cati*).

This plant grows in South Florida and its range extends south through the Caribbean to northern South America. In the Virgin Islands, it is referred to as Bread-and-cheese. So far, I haven't found why it is called bread-and-cheese, but did find it isn't the only plant with this name. Several others (such as the Begonia and Hawthorn) also are referred to as bread-and-cheese and those references said "because the plant could be eaten." Perhaps it is from the old British idiom "bread and cheese" which refers to something that is sustaining yet plain.



This species is also known as Cat's Claw and Black Bean. The name Cat's Claw comes from the pairs of spikes along the branches that resemble cat claws. The name black bean...well, someone didn't have an imagination...the bean is black. The trees are multi-trunked and can get up to 30' high.

Once the pods ripen, they pop open to expose four to nine black, shiny seeds surrounded by white to reddish fleshy arils. The fleshy aril around the seed is edible. The seeds have been used to make necklaces

and for medicinal purposes. Long before the Europeans arrived, the bark and fruit of the plants were used to treat bronchitis, chronic diarrhea, and to stop bleeding. Cat's Claw was historically used by the indigenous people of South America to stimulate the immune system in a variety of serious ailments and used as a traditional tonic for well being.

The large orange sulfur (*Phoebis agarithe* Boisduval) and the Miami blue (*Hemiargus thomasi* Clench) butterflies both use the Cat Claw as rearing plants for their larva.

Last week, I checked these plants out again and most of the pods are now open to expose the beautiful arils and seeds. Take a short trip down the east trail at Barefoot Beach to check these out before they are gone.

