

## The Weekly Plant

6 March 2016

**Common names:** sweet acacia, huisache, cassie

**Scientific name:** *Vachellia farnesiana*

**In our Community:** there are trees on Vivaldi, around Villa and ASA

### Discussion

Trees large enough to shade a house are of great value in the desert - and we don't have a lot of choices. Sweet acacia, which grows to 30', was once an exceptionally popular landscape plant in the Tucson area (and there are a number of them in the Village), but it has fallen out of favor.

In spring you can easily recognize sweet acacia, one of the first large trees to bloom. Thousands of golden puff-ball flowers cover the tree and perfume the air with a sweet fragrance (*warning*: some people are allergic to the pollen of this plant). The flowers are followed by 2-3" dark brown seed pods that are round, not flat. The bark is also dark and looks as if it is coming off in strips. Be careful around this tree, as the trunk often sports pairs of 1-3" white spines.



Sweet acacia is quite variable. Some plants are more multi-stemmed shrub than shade-giving tree. Initially, each form was considered a separate species. Now the shrubby, not as cold tolerant form is considered *Vachellia farnesiana* (formerly *Acacia farnesiana*). The tree-shaped, more cold-hardy form is *Vachellia farnesiana* var. *farnesiana* (formerly *Acacia smallii* or *Acacia minuta*). You will undoubtedly find all these names, along with horticultural selections, at nurseries. Be careful if you select this plant for your yard. Only var. *farnesiana* (*Acacia smallii*) can tolerate our coldest winter temperatures.



Sweet acacia is short-lived - only 25 to 50 years in cultivation. Additionally, the branches are brittle and tend to break in high winds. You might be able to lessen this problem with proper pruning, but this tree fights back. It is like a hydra, wherever you cut off a branch more will grow back. Together with a tendency to sprout extra branches even where no cuts were made, this creates a thicket of branches if you take even a short break from regular pruning. That thicket catches the wind, leading to breakage.

So, positives: tree with showy, fragrant spring flowers. Negatives: possible allergy problems, spines, messy fallen pods, yearly pruning requirement, short life, breaking branches. You can see why it has lost popularity

One last negative: sweet acacia, believed to be native to Central and South America<sup>1</sup>, has spread throughout the warm parts of the world and has naturalized in parts of the Gulf Coast, Rio Grande Valley, Arizona, and California. It is considered a pest species in Hawaii, is a serious pest plant in parts of Australia, and is known as Ellington's Curse in Fiji.

<sup>1</sup> exact origin is debated and undetermined, perhaps undeterminable.

*Above left: flowers and fruit of sweet acacia.  
Below (L-R): "hydra" branching after pruning,  
shredding bark, dense growth that can lead to wind throw.*

Photos and text by Mary Welch-Keesey

