

The Weekly Plant

16 May 2016

Common names: ironwood, desert ironwood

Scientific name: *Olneya tesota*¹

In our Community: west side of Villa 1, in front of house on lot 130.

Discussion

Sometimes common names can tell you a lot about a plant. “Poison ivy” is fairly descriptive. So is the name “ironwood”. Different plants with a similar distinctive property may be given the same common name. Such is the case with ironwood. Other than this Week’s Plant, I can find five other plants in the United States sometimes known as ironwood² (there are many ironwoods worldwide - see [here](#)).

The name ironwood is given to plants with dense, hard wood. Desert ironwood is one of the densest woods in the world, so dense it will sink in water. It is prized for carving.

As a horticulturist, I’m not particularly interested in carving up trees, but I am interested in knowing if the wood is hard or soft. Obviously, trees with soft wood are more likely to break in a storm or under the weight of snow. There’s an important correlation between the strength of the wood and the plant’s growth rate: trees with soft wood typically grow quickly and are often short-lived; trees with hard wood typically grow slowly but are long-lived.

So, how does our ironwood stack up? It is a slow-growing tree (faster with irrigation). Radiocarbon dating indicates these trees can live for 800 years. Their decay-resistant trunks can persist for 1600 years.³

Ironwoods are found only in the Sonoran Desert at elevations mostly below 2500 feet. In the Tucson area, they are found on the west side of town, in especially great abundance in Ironwood Forest National Monument and Saguaro National Park-West. They do not grow naturally east of Tucson, which is higher and thus colder.

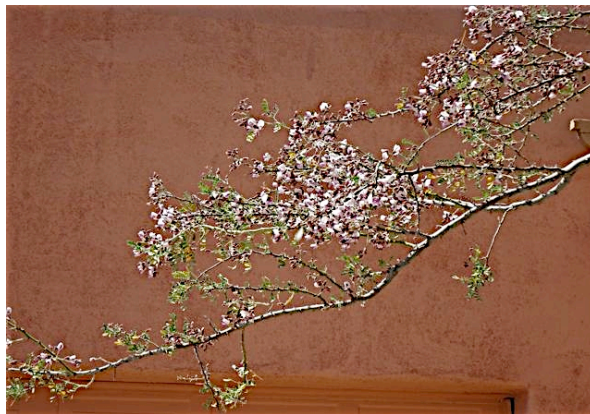
Several ironwoods have been planted in the Village. Though references state that damage can occur at around 20°F, at least a few of these trees survived our 17°F cold snap several years ago. A cold snap will make this normally evergreen tree drop its leaves as will severe drought. Leaves on mature branches may fall just before flowering. If you decide to add one of these trees to your landscape, pay attention to mature size. Ironwood can grow to 20’ x 20’, perhaps even to 30’ x 30’ with irrigation.

In its natural habitat, ironwood is associated with 500 different species, from the plants that grow under its canopy, to the birds that roost or nest in its branches, the insects that feast on its flowers and the animals that feed on its protein-rich leaves and seeds. Visit these two websites - [here](#) and [here](#) - for more information.

¹ [Tropicos](#) is the source of the accepted scientific name. ² In the eastern United States, American hornbeam (*Carpinus caroliniana*), hophornbeam (*Ostrya virginiana*), and black ironwood (*Krugiodendron ferreum*). In western US, western hophornbeam (*Ostrya knowltonii*) and New Mexico privet (*Forestiera pubescens*). “Hornbeam” refers to a tree used to make the strong, hard beams that went across the horns of oxen. ³ see [Biological Survey of Ironwood Forest National Monument](#).



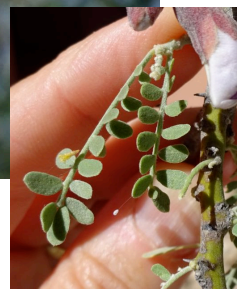
Left: sharp, curved spines are found at the base of each leaf.



Center: loose clusters of flowers form on short shoots along the branches in May.

Right: the pea flowers are present for less than 3 weeks. The seeds mature 4-8 weeks after pollination, coinciding with the summer rains.

Far Right: leaves have many tiny leaflets, to 2”.



Photos and text by Mary Welch-Keesey