**Aralia spinosa: Devils-Walkingstick**
Edward F. Gilman and Dennis G. Watson

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### Introduction
Anyone who has accidentally brushed against a devil's-walkingstick does not soon forget the experience, for this tall, spindly native shrub or small tree is armed up and down its thin trunk with extremely sharp, treacherous spines. Even the huge, much-divided leaves, which can reach four feet long and three feet wide, are armed with pointed prickles, ready to scratch anyone who comes within range. But when placed in an area where they can do no harm, devil's-walkingsticks add a tropical effect to a mixed shrubbery border or other naturalized setting, where the large leaves can easily spread out to their full length atop the slender, 10- to 15-foot-tall trunks. Under ideal conditions, these small trees can even reach 25 to 30 feet tall.

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### General Information

**Scientific name:** *Aralia spinosa*  
**Pronunciation:** uh-RAIL-ee-uh spy-NO-suh  
**Common name(s):** Devil's-walkingstick, Hercules-club  
**Family:** Araliaceae  
**USDA hardiness zones:** 5A through 9A (Fig. 2)  
**Origin:** native to North America  
**Invasive potential:** weedy native  
**Uses:** specimen; reclamation  
**Availability:** not native to North America

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### Description

**Height:** 10 to 15 feet  
**Spread:** 6 to 10 feet  
**Crown uniformity:** irregular  
**Crown shape:** upright/erect  
**Crown density:** open  
**Growth rate:** moderate  
**Texture:** fine

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**Foliage**
- Leaf arrangement: alternate (Fig. 3)
- Leaf type: bipinnately compound, odd-pinnately compound
- Leaf margin: serrate
- Leaf shape: ovate
- Leaf venation: pinnate
- Leaf type and persistence: deciduous
- Leaf blade length: 2 to 4 inches
- Leaf color: green
- Fall color: copper, red
- Fall characteristic: not showy

![Figure 3. Foliage](image)

**Flower**
- Flower color: white/cream/gray
- Flower characteristics: showy

**Fruit**
- Fruit shape: round
- Fruit length: less than .5 inch
- Fruit covering: fleshy
- Fruit color: purple, black
- Fruit characteristics: attracts birds; not showy; fruit/leaves not a litter problem

**Trunk and Branches**
- Trunk/bark/branches: branches don't droop; not showy; typically multi-trunked; no thorns
- Pruning requirement: needed for strong structure
- Breakage: susceptible to breakage
- Current year twig color: gray, brown
- Current year twig thickness: very thick
- Wood specific gravity: unknown

**Culture**
- Light requirement: full sun, partial sun or partial shade
- Soil tolerances: clay; sand; loam; alkaline; acidic; extended flooding; well-drained
- Drought tolerance: moderate

**Aerosol salt tolerance**: unknown

**Other**
- Roots: not a problem
- Winter interest: no
- Outstanding tree: no
- Ozone sensitivity: unknown
- Verticillium wilt susceptibility: unknown
- Pest resistance: free of serious pests and diseases

**Use and Management**

The young leaves of devil's-walkingstick are bronze-colored, green in summer, but return to a bronze/red mottled with some yellow before dropping in fall. As striking as the thorns are the large, summertime panicles of bloom, 12 to 18 inches in diameter and up to three feet long, held above the crown of leaves for about 10 days and gently draping outward under the weight of the flower head. Following these blooms is the production of a great quantity of dark, purple-black, juicy berries that are exceptionally popular with birds.

Devil's-walkingstick is quite easy to grow and literally thrives on neglect. Plants should be grown in full sun or partial shade on any almost any kind of soil, acid or alkaline, moist or dry, as long as it is well drained, and it is frequently found along stream banks and road sides. Devil's-walkingstick grows rapidly and usually spreads by sprouts produced from its base, eventually creating an impenetrable thicket if left to its own devices. While the temptation would be to use this plant as a barrier planting, the effect of the thorned, naked trunks during wintertime is quite harsh and perhaps unattractive to some people. The plant can be trained into a small, single or multi-stemmed tree and used in a shrubbery border to add height and interest, or left to create a thicket. It is not normally available in nurseries. It can be transplanted during winter and used as a specimen in an out-of-the-way place where it is sure to capture the curiosity of many visitors, particularly when it is in flower.

Propagation is by seed, sucker-division, or root cuttings, and plants are easily transplanted. A smaller, non-thorny selection of this plant would make a nice, native alternative to the ever-popular nandina shrub.

**Pests and Diseases**

No pests or diseases are of major concern.