

Prunus americana American Plum¹

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Introduction

Growing 20 feet tall and wide, American plum forms a rounded mass of slender, thorny branches sprouting from a short trunk. In spring, before the 1 to 2 inch long leaves appear, American plum is festooned with small, white, fragrant flowers that make the trees quite decorative in the presence of other trees, which are often still dormant. The half-inch-diameter fruits that follow are red, ripening to yellow, and are extremely popular with wildlife and people. The plums are either eaten fresh or used to make a delicious jelly.



Figure 1. Full Form - *Prunus americana*: American Plum
Credits: Edward F. Gilman, UF/IFAS



Figure 2. Full Form, Fall Color - *Prunus americana*: American Plum
Credits: Edward F. Gilman, UF/IFAS

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Figure 3. Leaf, Fall Color - *Prunus americana*: American Plum
Credits: Edward F. Gilman, UF/IFAS



Figure 4. Flower - *Prunus americana*: American Plum
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General Information

Scientific name: *Prunus americana*

Pronunciation: PROO-nus uh-mair-ih-KAY-nuh

Common name(s): American plum

Family: *Rosaceae*

Plant type: tree

USDA hardiness zones: 3B through 8 (Figure 5)

Planting month for zone 7: year round

Planting month for zone 8: year round

Origin: native to Florida

Invasive potential: native plant that often reproduces into nearby landscapes

Uses: near a deck or patio; specimen; attracts butterflies

Availability: grown in small quantities by a small number of nurseries



Figure 5. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

Description

Height: 15 to 20 feet

Spread: 12 to 18 feet

Plant habit: round

Plant density: moderate

Growth rate: moderate

Texture: medium

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate

Leaf type: simple

Leaf margin: serrate

Leaf shape: ovate; obovate

Leaf venation: pinnate; reticulate

Leaf type and persistence: deciduous

Leaf blade length: 2 to 4 inches

Leaf color: green

Fall color: yellow

Fall characteristic: showy

Flower

Flower color: white

Flower characteristic: spring flowering

Fruit

Fruit shape: round

Fruit length: 0.5 to 1 inch

Fruit cover: fleshy

Fruit color: yellow

Fruit characteristic: attracts birds

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: typically multi-trunked or clumping stems; thorns present; can be trained to grow with a short, single trunk

Current year stem/twig color: brown

Current year stem/twig thickness: thin

Culture

Light requirement: plant grows in part shade/part sun

Soil tolerances: acidic; alkaline; sand; loam; clay

Drought tolerance: high

Soil salt tolerances: unknown

Plant spacing: 36 to 60 inches

Other

Roots: usually not a problem

Winter interest: no special winter interest

Outstanding plant: not particularly outstanding

Pest resistance: long-term health usually not affected by pests

Use and Management

Grown occasionally with a short, single leader and used as a patio or residential landscape tree, American plum is usually seen with a multiple trunk planted as a specimen or in a median strip or planted on 15 to 25 foot centers along

the entrance road to a commercial property. It tends to sprout from the base of the trunk, forming multi-stemmed thickets. This is the form most commonly seen in its native habitat on old fields and on other disturbed sites. These may need to be removed regularly to help keep the plant looking neat. It makes a nice addition to the shrub border in the backyard. The crown often leans to one side or the other. Occasional pruning can significantly improve the form of the crown.

A North American native tree, American plum is very easily grown and has no special cultural requirements. It tolerates drought and sandy or clayey soil but does poorly in alkaline pH. These small trees grow quickly but have a relatively short life. This should not stop you from planting the tree since it will serve the landscape well during its life.

Propagation is by seed or cuttings.

Pests and Management

No pests or diseases are of major concern.

Tent caterpillar can defoliate trees and could weaken them with repeated defoliations.