

Enterolobium cyclocarpum, Ear Tree¹

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Family

Fabaceae, pea family

Genus

Enterolobium comes from two Greek words: *entero*, which means “intestines,” and *lobium*, which means “lobe,” together referring to the resemblance of seedpods common amongst species of this genus to curled intestines.

Species

The species name *cyclocarpum* is a combination of the Greek words *cyclo*, meaning “circle,” and *carpus*, which means “fruit.” The name is also in reference to the curled seedpods produced by this species.

Common Name

Ear tree, Guanacaste

The name “ear tree” is in reference to the resemblance between its semicircular seedpod and a human or monkey ear.

Description

This deciduous tree is native to Mexico, Central America, and northern South America, but has also been introduced in Florida, the Caribbean Islands, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Hawaii. It can grow in a wide range of soil types, including clayey, sandy, and alkaline soils. Though ear tree grows best

in regions with a dry season, it prefers warm and moist climates.



Figure 1. The seedpods of the *Enterolobium cyclocarpum* lend this tree its common name of “ear tree.”

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When grown in direct sunlight, ear tree can reach heights of up to 75 feet. Its leaves are light green, oblong in shape, and have an alternate arrangement that is bipinnately compound. Each leaflet is ½ inch long, and multiple leaflets make up 6- to 16-inch-long leaves. The bark is light gray with reddish-brown lenticels or striations that occur vertically along the trunk and branches, while spurs may be present at the base of the tree. Small greenish-white flowers appear in globular clusters in the spring, and fruits are 3- to 4½-inch-long, dark brown, curled pods that are depressed flat enough to reveal the location of seeds within them. Each pod contains 8–16 oval-shaped seeds that

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loosen themselves from the walls of the fully ripened pod approximately one year later.

Allergen

Inhalation of sawdust from this tree can be irritating to the upper respiratory system.

Storm Tolerance

Ear tree is not able to withstand strong winds, and its limbs are easily broken during storms.

Applications

Commercial/Practical

In Central America, some people extract the seeds from pods and grind them into flour. Additionally, seeds can be roasted and eaten whole. The ear tree is commonly used as a shade tree on coffee plantations and on cattle ranches where it serves as a source of nourishment for cattle. The heartwood is malleable and highly resistant to fungus and dry-wood termites, and it is utilized in furniture components for paneling and as a veneer.

Horticultural

Mature trees have a wide, spreading crown that makes for a useful shade tree in parks or at schools. However, the crown may be too large for planting in residential areas, and given ear tree's susceptibility to limb breakage during high wind events, it may also be a risky choice near homes or buildings in Florida. This tree is not tolerant of salty conditions and is, therefore, best planted inland.

Additional References

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