

Cordia sebestena: Geiger Tree¹

Edward F. Gilman, Dennis G. Watson, Ryan W. Klein, Andrew K. Koeser, Deborah R. Hilbert, and Drew C. McLean²

Introduction

This dense, rounded, evergreen native tree grows slowly to a height of 30 feet with a spread of 25 feet and can develop a trunk 12 inches thick. The large, 4 to 9-inch-long, stiff, dark green leaves are rough and hairy, feeling much like sandpaper. Appearing throughout the year, but especially in spring and summer, are dark orange, 2-inch-wide flowers which appear in clusters at branch tips. The splendid flowers are followed by one to 2-inch-long, egg-shaped fruits, which have a pleasant fragrance but are not particularly tasty.

General Information

Scientific name: *Cordia sebestena*

Pronunciation: KOR-dee-uh seb-ess-TAY-nuh

Common name(s): Geiger tree

Family: *Boraginaceae*

USDA hardiness zones: 10B through 11 (Figure 2)

Origin: native to the West Indies and northern South America

UF/IFAS Invasive Assessment Status: not assessed/incomplete assessment

Uses: container or planter; street without sidewalk; deck or patio; shade; specimen; parking lot island < 100 sq ft; parking lot island 100–200 sq ft; parking lot island > 200 sq ft; sidewalk cutout (tree pit); tree lawn 3–4 feet wide; tree lawn 4–6 feet wide; tree lawn > 6 ft wide; highway median



Figure 1. Full Form—*Cordia sebestena*: Geiger tree

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2. Edward F. Gilman, professor emeritus, Environmental Horticulture Department; Dennis G. Watson, former associate professor, Agricultural Engineering Department; Ryan W. Klein, graduate assistant, Environmental Horticulture Department; Andrew K. Koeser, assistant professor, Environmental Horticulture Department, UF/IFAS Gulf Coast Research and Education Center; Deborah R. Hilbert, graduate assistant, Environmental Horticulture Department, GCREC; and Drew C. McLean, biological scientist, Environmental Horticulture Department, GCREC; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

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Figure 2. Range

Description

Height: 25 to 30 feet
Spread: 20 to 25 feet
Crown uniformity: symmetrical
Crown shape: round, vase
Crown density: moderate
Growth rate: slow
Texture: coarse

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate
Leaf type: simple
Leaf margin: undulate
Leaf shape: ovate
Leaf venation: brachidodrome, pinnate
Leaf type and persistence: evergreen, broadleaf evergreen
Leaf blade length: 4 to 9 inches
Leaf color: green and rough on top, paler green and pubescent underneath
Fall color: no color change
Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: orange red
Flower characteristics: very showy; funnel-shaped; emerges in clusters at branch tips
Flowering: most of the year, but abundant in summer

Fruit

Fruit shape: oval; egg-shaped
Fruit length: 1 to 2 inches
Fruit covering: dry or hard
Fruit color: turns from green to white when ripe
Fruit characteristics: does not attract wildlife; showy; fruit/leaves a litter problem; fragrant; fleshy 1-4 seeded drupe



Figure 3. Leaf—*Cordia sebestena*: Geiger tree



Figure 4. Flower—*Cordia sebestena*: Geiger tree



Figure 5. Fruit—*Cordia sebestena*: Geiger tree

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/branches: branches droop; not showy; can be trained to one trunk; no thorns

Bark: dark gray or brown, and deeply furrowed

Pruning requirement: needed for strong structure

Breakage: resistant

Current year twig color: brown

Current year twig thickness: medium

Wood specific gravity: 0.70



Figure 6. Bark—*Cordia sebestena*: Geiger tree

Credits: Gitta Hasing

Culture

Light requirement: full sun to partial shade

Soil tolerances: clay; sand; loam; alkaline; acidic; well-drained

Drought tolerance: high

Aerosol salt tolerance: high

Other

Roots: not a problem

Winter interest: no

Outstanding tree: no

Ozone sensitivity: unknown

Verticillium wilt susceptibility: unknown

Pest resistance: resistant to pests/diseases

Use and Management

Geiger tree is quite salt- and brackish-water tolerant, making it ideal for use in coastal landscapes as a free-standing specimen, patio or framing tree. Most specimens are seen as multitrunked and low-branching but nurseries can produce single-trunked trees suitable for downtown and parking lots. It has been used as a street tree in some communities but drops leaves as a drought-avoidance strategy in prolonged dry spells. According to legend, the common name was bestowed by Audubon in commemoration of John Geiger, a Key West pilot and wrecker of the 19th century and is now used quite universally as the common name for this excellent Florida native tree.

Growing in full sun to partial shade, Geiger tree is tolerant of light, sandy, alkaline soils and salt-spray. It is highly recommended for seaside plantings. Do not plant where there is the slightest danger of frost.

Cordia boissieri is frost-resistant (tolerating temperatures in the high 20's) and has stunning white flowers with yellow centers.

Propagation is by seeds or layering.

Pests

Mites, scales, and caterpillars will occasionally attack geiger tree. The geiger beetle defoliates the tree upon occasion but the trees generally grow out of it and do fine. The problem can be locally troublesome.

Diseases

No diseases are of major concern.

Reference

Koeser, A.K., Friedman, M.H., Hasing, G., Finley, H., Schelb, J. 2017. *Trees: South Florida and the Keys*. Gainesville: University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.