

Parkinsonia aculeata: Jerusalem-Thorn¹

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Introduction

Loose, flowing, delicate leaflets, a light, airy, low-branching growth habit with pendulous branch-tips, and a profusion of small, slightly fragrant, bright yellow blooms combine to create this popular, small landscape tree. Quickly reaching a height of 15 to 25 feet with a similar spread, this multitrunked deciduous tree is actually much stronger than its fragile appearance would suggest. Branch bark often remains bright green even on several-year-old limbs.

General Information

Scientific name: *Parkinsonia aculeata*

Pronunciation: par-kin-SO-nee-uh ah-kew-lee-AY-tuh

Common name(s): Jerusalem-thorn, retama

Family: *Fabaceae*

USDA hardiness zones: 8B through 11 (Figure 2)

Origin: native to the southwestern United States, Mexico, and tropical Americas

UF/IFAS Invasive Assessment Status: invasive and not recommended (North, Central, South)

Uses: street without sidewalk; specimen; parking lot island < 100 sq ft; parking lot island 100-200 sq ft; parking lot island > 200 sq ft; urban tolerant; highway median



Figure 1. Full Form - *Parkinsonia aculeata*: Jerusalem-thorn
Credits: UF/IFAS

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Figure 2. Range

Description

Height: 15 to 20 feet

Spread: 20 to 25 feet

Crown uniformity: irregular

Crown shape: vase, spreading

Crown density: open

Growth rate: fast

Texture: fine

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate

Leaf type: odd-pinnately compound; occur in pairs of 1 to 2 primary leaflets and made up of 20 to 30 pairs of secondary leaflets

Leaf margin: entire

Leaf shape: linear, oblanceolate



Figure 3. Leaf - *Parkinsonia aculeata*: Jerusalem-thorn
Credits: UF/IFAS

Leaf venation: none, or difficult to see

Leaf type and persistence: deciduous

Leaf blade length: primary leaflets are 8 to 16 inches; secondary leaflets are ¼ inch

Leaf color: green to yellow green

Fall color: no color change

Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: bright yellow with a red center

Flower characteristics: very showy; slightly fragrant; emerges in clusters along 3-8" long, pendulous racemes

Flowering: spring



Figure 4. Flower - *Parkinsonia aculeata*: Jerusalem-thorn
Credits: UF/IFAS

Fruit

Fruit shape: pod or pod-like with a pointed apex; constricted by obvious, bulbous seed pouches

Fruit length: 1 to 3 inches, 3 to 6 inches

Fruit covering: dry or hard

Fruit color: turns from green to yellow brown when

Fruit characteristics: does not attract wildlife; showy; fruit/leaves not a litter problem

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/branches: branches droop; showy; typically multi-trunked; thorns

Bark: light green to yellow green and smooth, turning brown and scaly with age, with sharp thorns along twig nodes

Pruning requirement: needed for strong structure

Breakage: resistant

Current year twig color: green

Current year twig thickness: thin, medium

Wood specific gravity: unknown



Figure 5. Fruit - *Parkinsonia aculeata*: Jerusalem-thorn
Credits: UF/IFAS



Figure 7. Bark - *Parkinsonia aculeata*: Jerusalem-thorn
Credits: Gitta Hasing, UF/IFAS

Culture

Light requirement: full sun

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: yes

Ozone sensitivity: unknown

Verticillium wilt susceptibility: unknown

Pest resistance: free of serious pests and diseases

Use and Management

Be sure to purchase trees with a well-developed central leader and upright branches for street and parking lot plantings to allow for clearance for vehicles. This can be a tough chore as branches weep toward the ground as they spread from the tree so older specimens can be wider than tall. Open-grown trees are beautiful if left unpruned, forming a fountain of fine texture. The stems are armed with short, sharp spines and the trees should be located where they will not injure passersby.

Thriving in full sun on any well-drained soil, Jerusalem-thorn will tolerate heat, drought, alkaline soil, and salt but not wet, soggy soil. It will grow in clay only if it drains very well. In spite of its rapid growth rate, it has strong wood, withstanding harsh winds with ease due to the open growth habit. However, the trees have a short life, approximately 15 to 20 years. Poor drainage may account for short life on many sites, so locate it accordingly in areas where soil is never wet for more than an hour or two. The bark is thin and easily injured and the tree appears to compartmentalize decay poorly. Locate the tree properly and design the site to minimize trunk injury.

Adapted to arid regions, Jerusalem-thorn is one of the best choices for hot, dry locations and its salt-tolerance makes it ideal for seaside plantings. The light shade afforded by the fine-textured foliage allows lawns to thrive beneath this tree and its small size allows a multitude of applications, from specimen, parking lot, median, or street tree, set back from the road or walk. There are reports of the plant escaping cultivation in some locations along the gulf coast.

Propagation is by seed.

Pests

Some pests of Jerusalem Thorn are scales and thorn bugs, but none are serious.

Diseases

One disease that infects this tree on wet soils is root rot but none are serious on other sites.

Witches-broom occasionally causes a proliferation of branches forming tight heads of foliage.

Reference

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