

***Pongamia pinnata*: Pongam¹**

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Introduction

Pongam is a fast-growing evergreen tree which reaches 40 feet in height with up to a 55-foot spread, forming a broad, spreading canopy casting moderate shade. The six- to nine-inch-long, pinnately compound, shiny dark green leaves are briefly deciduous, dropping for just a short period of time in early spring but being quickly replaced by new growth. Pongam is at its finest in the spring when the showy, hanging clusters of white, pink, or lavender, pea-like, fragrant blossoms appear, the clusters up to 10 inches long. These beautiful blossoms and the glossy, nearly-evergreen leaves help make pongam a favorite for use as a specimen, shade, or windbreak. It has also been planted as a street tree, but dropping pods often litter the ground. However, the seeds which are contained within the oval, 1 ¼-2-inch-long, brown seedpods are poisonous, a fact which should be considered in placing the tree in the landscape, if many children are present.

General Information

Scientific name: *Millettia pinnata*

Pronunciation: mil-LET-ee-uh pih-NAY-tuh

Common name(s): Pongam, Karum tree, poonga-oil tree

Family: *Fabaceae*

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



Figure 1. Full Form - *Millettia pinnata*: pongam

Credits: UF/IFAS

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Origin: native to southeast Asia, Australia, and the western Pacific Islands

UF/IFAS Invasive Assessment Status: invasive and not recommended except for “specified and limited” use approved by the UF/IFAS Invasive Plant Working Group (North, Central, South)

Uses: specimen; shade; deck or patio; highway median; street without sidewalk; tree lawn 4-6 feet wide; tree lawn > 6 ft wide; parking lot island 100-200 sq ft; parking lot island > 200 sq ft



Figure 2. Range

Description

Height: 30 to 40 feet

Spread: 30 to 55 feet

Crown uniformity: symmetrical

Crown shape: round

Crown density: dense

Growth rate: fast

Texture: medium

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate

Leaf type: odd-pinnately compound; made up of 5-9 leaflets but most often 7

Leaf margin: entire

Leaf shape: elliptic (oval)

Leaf venation: pinnate

Leaf type and persistence: evergreen

Leaf blade length: 6 to 8 inches; leaflets are 3 to 4 inches

Leaf color: dark green and shiny on top, paler green underneath

Fall color: no color change

Fall characteristic: not showy



Figure 3. Leaf - *Millettia pinnata*: pongam

Credits: UF/IFAS

Flower

Flower color: white, pink, or lavender

Flower characteristics: somewhat fragrant; pea-like; emerges in clusters on 5-10" long, lateral and terminal racemes

Flowering: spring to summer

Fruit

Fruit shape: oval to flat pod, with a curved and pointed tip

Fruit length: 1 ¼ to 2 inches

Fruit covering: dry or hard

Fruit color: yellow to brown

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

Fruiting: fall to spring

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/branches: branches droop; not showy; typically multi-trunked; no thorns

Bark: gray to brown and smooth or slightly roughened

Pruning requirement: needed for strong structure

Breakage: resistant

Current year twig color: green

Current year twig thickness: thin

Wood specific gravity: unknown



Figure 4. Flower - *Millettia pinnata*: pongam
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Figure 5. Fruit - *Millettia pinnata*: pongam
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Culture

Light requirement: full sun to partial shade

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

Drought tolerance: high



Figure 6. Bark - *Millettia pinnata*: pongam
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Soil salt tolerance: moderate to high

Aerosol salt tolerance: moderate to 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

Pongam should be grown in full sun or partial shade on well-drained soil. A relatively low-maintenance tree once established, pongam is resistant to high winds and drought but is susceptible to freezing temperatures below 30-degrees F. Pongam will show nutritional deficiencies if grown on soil with a pH above 7.5.

Space major limbs along the trunk to increase the structural strength of the tree. Keep limbs less than two-thirds the diameter of the trunk to help ensure that branches are well secured to the tree.

Propagation is by seed.

Pests

No pests are of major concern, but caterpillars occasionally cause some defoliation.

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. University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.