Sweet Acacia (*Vachellia farnesiana)*: Identification, Uses and Maintenance

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In full bloom. Lee County. Late December.

Mid-December.

Family: Fabaceae
Common Names: Sweet Acacia, Aromita, Casha, Cassie, Huisache, Perfume Acacia, Mealy wattle
Synonyms (Discarded Names): *Acacia farnesiana, A. pinetorum, A. smallii, Mimosa farnesiana, Pitchecelldoium minutum, Vachellia peninsularis*
Origin: Florida, Caribbean, Central America, Northern South America, Bolivia, Columbia, Peru
U.S.D.A. Zone: 9A-12B (21ºF minimum)
Plant Type: Shrub or small tree
Growth Rate: Moderately fast
Typical Tree Dimension: 18' x 30'
Leaf Persistence: Semi-deciduous
Flowering Months: November-February
Intense Blooming Days: Not known
Flower Color: Yellow
Light Requirements: Full sun to part shade
Soil Requirements: Wide
Drought Tolerance: High
Salt Tolerance: Moderate
Wind Tolerance: High
Nutritional Requirements: Low
Major Potential Pests: Caterpillars, Mexican lac scales, thorn bugs
Propagation: Seeds or cuttings
Motility: Self seeding
IFAS Assessment: Florida native
Human Hazards: Spiny
Uses: Landscaping in native plant yards focus on wildlife, barrier hedges, ornamental tree.

Nativity and Distribution

Its exact origin in the Americas is not known but it is now widely distributed in sub-tropical and tropical America. It has naturalized in nearly every tropical country. Introduced into the Hawaiian Islands and Australia, it has become a nuisance species. In Florida it is found along coastal hammocks, pinelands, and disturbed areas. It is cultivated in Southern Florida and parts of Central Florida and the western panhandle of the state.

Growth Habit

Sweet Acacia is a spiny semi-deciduous shrub or small tree that is variable in appearance. Both shrub and tree have an open growth habit. The latter has a low oval and spreading crown that droops to the ground if not pruned. Sometimes the crown flattens. This occurs more frequently in coastal specimens. The crown is made up of numerous small arching branches. Stems and connecting branches zigzag to varying degrees. Unpruned trees typically reach a height of about 18 feet and a spread of 30 feet. Trunk diameter is up to 7 inches in the oldest specimen but usually remains under 5 inches. Growth rate slows when it reaches a height of approximately 15 feet tall. Before flowering in late fall or early winter, Sweet Acacia loses much of its foliage

Lenticels are prominent on the stems and branches. A pair of stipules are represented by two silvery spines at the base of each leaf node. They are of equivalent size normally ranging from 0.25 inches to 1.5 inches long. Lenticels and spines can persist on the older stems but are not found on aged trunks. Sweet Acacia has a relatively short lifespan of about 12 to 18 years in South Florida.

Thicket on disturbed land. Late April.

Partly flowering tree. Mid-December.

Lenticles and paired spines on a branch.

Zigzag stems and branch. Late November.

Leaves

Leaves are even-bipinnate and feathery. They are usually 3 to 4 inches long and 1.5 to 2.5 inches wide with 2 to 8 pairs of pinnae. Each pinnae has 10 to 30 pairs of narrow, (linear or oblong), entire, soft leaflets, 0.13 to 0.2 inches long. The slender leaf petiole is about an inch long. Often the alternate leaves are crowded on short spur twigs and there appear to be more than one at a node. The tree is semi-deciduous and sheds most of its leaves in late fall or winter just before flowering. New leaves and flowers appear simultaneously on the plant. The new leaves are light green becoming a darker green in May, June or July.

Bipinnate leaf with five pairs of pinnae.

Leaves and spines. Mid-May.

Flowers and Flowering

Flowers are tightly clustered together in a staminous inflorescence ball that arises from a leaf axis. Their stalks are 0.75 to 1.5 inches long. The inflorescence is about 0.5 inches across with many deep yellow threadlike stamens. Occasional flowering develops throughout the year. However, most flowering occur from November to February. The bloom is abundant and showy during those months. The flowers are fragrant. The fragrance is intermittent, being strong at some times, and nil at others. The most intense scent seems to occur during the day in bright sunlight.

Globular staminous inflorescences composed of many flowers.

Late December.

Fruits

The fruits are green pods becoming black and remaining dehiscent at maturity. Pods are sub-cylindrical, oblong, straight or slightly curved, and 1.5 to 3 inches long, usually with a blunt base. They are borne singly or in clusters of up to seven pods on a single stalk. The pods are thick, sometimes narrowing slightly between the seeds. Several shiny brown, somewhat flattened, elliptic seeds, approximately 0.3 inches long, are inside each pod. Each seed is surrounded by abundant fleshy-spongy pulp. Many pods remain attached to the plant after maturity.

Examples of 1, 2, 3 and 4 pods extended by single stalks. Late November.

Leaf, inflorescence, double spines and pod. Mid-December.

Uses

Sweet Acacia makes an excellent barrier shrub that can also be used as a specimen tree. It is an exceptional choice for native landscapes and nesting cover for wildlife. As a small frangible tree, it is suitable for powerline right-of-way and highway medians. In residential areas, the dainty fernlike leaves and its diminutive size make Sweet Acacia useful as a flowering tree in the small garden or patio. It is widely cultivated in parts of Southern Europe for the oil from the flowers which is used for making perfume.

Management

Although commonly referred to as a tree, the plant will grow into a multi-trunked shrub if not properly managed in its early age. Due to its many spines, avoid planting it next to driveways or in locations of frequent foot traffic. It may be used in landscaping where temperatures do not drop below 21ºF. Sweet Acacia thrives in full sun in a variety of soils. It will take a year or more for a tree to become properly rooted in the soil. Stake the tree as it is being established and provide it with adequate irrigation. Reduce irrigation once the tree is established. Established plants will tolerate infrequent flooding from fresh water for several days.

If planted on lawns or in landscape beds, the fallen minute leaflets do not create litter problems. A great many hanging black pods are reported to fall in quick succession in late winter or spring. The pods are rich in tannin. When moistened by dew, rain, or irrigation water, they can leave purple colored stains where they fall on concrete. Stains can be removed by a bleach cleanser. The species can become weedy in certain situations. Sweet Acacia has a relatively short lifespan of 12 to 18 years. Root rot due to prolonged wet soil can curtail its longevity.

Insect Pests

Sucking and chewing insects can be a problem to Sweet Acacia. The most commonly encountered sucking insects are thorn bugs and Mexican lac scales. Thorn bugs feed from stems and can cause stem dieback. Lac scales can be so numerous so as to cause extensive stem and branch diebacks and a large accumulation of sooty mold on the plant. Caterpillars and Sri Lanka weevils are the chewing insects of concern. Elusive small caterpillars cause extensive defoliation and accumulation of webbing and frass on tattered leaves. Sri Lanka weevils fall from the plants if disturbed but their damage is noticeable by the presence of some insects and consumed leaves.

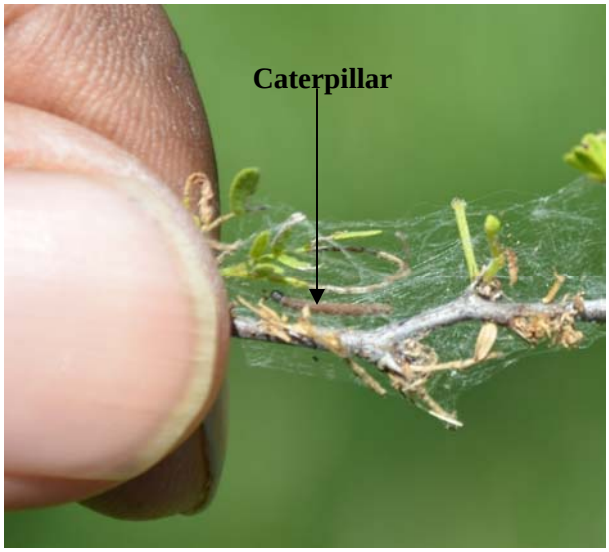
Purple stain on concrete driveway. Late April.

Immature and mature thorn bugs on stems.

Close-up of thorn bugs on Sweet Acacia stem.

Mexican lac scales on Sweet Acacia stem.

Caterpillar damage.



Minute caterpillar and webbing.

Sri Lanka weevil on Sweet Acacia leaf.

Apotoforma rotundipennis moth and probable cause of damage to Sweet Acacia in the caterpillar stage.

Tree Development

This tree is at its greenest in the summer and fall usually from July through November. In the six years shown here, it had an average growth of approximately 2 feet per year. By March 2015, the tree measured 14'x27' and would have had a wider canopy if it was not pruned on several occasions.

August, 2009

October, 2010

July, 2011

November, 2011

June, 2012

September, 2013

November, 2014

March, 2015.

Staked tree in roadway median. Fort Myers, Mid-May.

Orlando, Late May.

St. Petersburg, Early June.

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Tree Links

Aerial Roots of Ficus Trees
Eucalyptus Trees
Flowering Tree Fact Sheets
How to identify a Tree
Italian Cypress and Mast Trees
Shade Trees for South Florida
Small Trees for South Florida
Starburst Clerodendrum
Tamarind
Tropical Almond Tree
Wild Tamarind
Yellow Tabebuias

Youtubes

Stephen Brown's Landscape Channel
Fall Flowering Trees
Thorn bugs

All pictures taken by Stephen H. Brown except where indicated.

This fact sheet was reviewed by Lyle Buss, University of Florida, Gainesville; Peggy Cruz, Lee County Extension; Pat Rooney, Master Gardener; John Sibley, Master Gardener and owner of All Native Garden Center, Nursery & Landscapes, Fort Myers; Gayle Edwards, Master Gardener.

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