

“Green stick”

The Palo Verde tree was designated the State tree of Arizona in 1954. Its name, of course, is Spanish for green stick, aptly named for the green bark that is the trade mark of this common tree of the Sonoran Desert. The bark contains chlorophyll, which allows the Palo Verde to make food even if the tree has shed its leaves to avoid water loss during the hot, dry summer months.

A legume, with nitrogen fixing capabilities, this marvelous tree puts on a beautiful spring show of golden yellow blossoms from March through May. An afternoon beneath its boughs, while it is in full bloom, is an idyllic way to pass the time. Serenity can be found in the golden glow of the light filtering through the tree's blossom laden branches and the hum of bees busy at work making it one of the Sonoran Desert's most lavish gifts. Of course, when a high wind gusts, these same beautiful flowers can mean big trouble to pool pumps if they are not removed in a timely manner!

Determining the age of a Palo Verde is difficult as the wood doesn't develop growth rings like other trees, however it's thought that this species can live to be up to four hundred years old. Very drought tolerant, the Palo Verde can go months without a drink. Unlike the Mesquites, which flourish and grow faster with lots of water, too much water can spell the end for the Palo Verde. It's definitely not a tree to plant in turf.

The Palo Verde has been widely hybridized for landscape uses in the Desert Southwest, propagated for its showy spring flowers and smooth graceful branches. One variety, the Palo Brea, adds a great deal of interest to your backyard due to its uniquely sculpted branches. The Desert Museum Hybrid Palo Verde, introduced by the Arizona Sonora Desert Museum in 1987, is known for its showy flowers, rapid thorn-less growth, and upright branches which require little staking or pruning.

The Palo Verde was well known to the Native Americans of the area, who would collect the green seeds, which taste a bit like peas, to eat raw or grind and dry to make a mush. Rodents like to gather and bury the seeds which will sprout throughout your yard after a spring rain. Unfortunately the wood is soft, pithy and smells pretty awful when burned so it has little use in that respect.

A question that frequently pops up about the Palo Verde is how do I get rid of Mistletoe? Disseminated by birds, mistletoe seeds, when dropped, directly infiltrate the host plant. Left unattended, the parasite will stunt the tree's growth and eventually kill its host. The only way to remove it is by cutting off the infected branch.

So the next time the Palo Verde puts on a springtime show, grab your favorite book, drink and lawn chair, kick back, and enjoy one of the Sonoran Desert's treasures!

Tom McDonald owns Smiling Dog Landscapes and is President of the Superstition Area Land Trust (S.A.L.T.).