



MEET THE PALO VERDE TREE

by Cathy Ronk, Master Gardener

The Palo Verde tree with its drought tolerance, attractive bark, contrasting bloom color, and manageable size makes it a tree worth knowing. Palo Verde--Spanish for “green pole” or “green stick”-- refers to the tree’s green branches and trunk. Its scientific (botanical) name is *Parkinsonia*, formerly called *Cercidium*, which is a genus of flowering plants in the pea family with approximately 12 species native to the semi-desert regions of Africa and the Americas. The name of this genus honors English apothecary and botanist John Parkinson (1567-1650).

Interesting Facts:

- Some Palo Verde species have thorny branches.
- While most plants photosynthesize (produce food) with green pigments in their leaves, about three quarters of the Palo Verde tree’s food is metabolized through its green bark. This is an important design for a tree with small, short-lived leaves.
- The native Foothills Palo Verde tree serves as a “nurse plant” for saguaro cacti, providing nitrogen-rich leaf/seedpod/blossom litter to the ground, shade in summer and warmth in winter—a microhabitat. The slow-growing, longer-lived saguaro eventually replaces its protector.
- Irish botanist Thomas Coulter was the first trained botanist to collect the Palo Verde. He gathered his specimens in Sonora, Mexico in 1830.
- In 1954, the State of Arizona named the Palo Verde as its State Tree. Because the legislature didn’t distinguish between the two native tree species, both the Foothills Palo Verde and Blue Palo Verde share the honor.



The Palo Verde “Desert Museum” Tree

Description:

Our Master Gardener tree list-- entitled “Ornamental Trees for Home Gardens and Landscapes,” recommends the Palo Verde tree hybrid called *Parkinsonia* ‘Desert Museum.’ It is a deciduous tree, meaning it drops all its leaves in one season. The complex hybrid combines the best traits of Mexican (*P. aculeata*), Blue (*P. floridum*), and Foothills (*P. microphyllum*) Palo Verde tree species.

Its upright, multi-trunked form produces filtered shade and grows to 20 feet tall and 20 feet wide in 3 to 5 years, and may grow a bit larger over time. This favored hybrid has pale green, smooth bark, green stems, thornless branches, and small green leaves. Large (1 inch) bright yellow flowers bloom over a long period in spring, with rebloom possible in summer. Since it produces few seed pods and drops only a small amount of litter, it makes a good garden, street, or sidewalk tree.

Care:

Plant any time of the year in full sun. This tree adapts to most soil types but prefers soil that drains well. Water deeply after planting, and mulch. Since 'Desert Museum' tolerates heat and drought, it requires little water once established. Too much water can cause it to grow too fast and become top heavy. There is no need to fertilize.

Prune only to enhance form and during the growing season of spring when the limbs are more flexible. (Do not prune when the temperature is 100 degrees or higher.) Occasional thinning is the desirable method of pruning to remove crossing, unruly, or too-low branches. Do not hedge or head back trees, as it will only stimulate excessive, weak branching.

Design Tips:

A single Palo Verde tree in the garden can be used as a focal point with its distinctive, year-long, green bark and branch color. An additional bonus is its display of prolific yellow blooms. You can add to the drama by up-lighting this multi-trunked tree at night. Plant it next to a wall for an attractive silhouette.

The filtered shade cast by its small leaves provides an ideal canopy under which drought-tolerant annuals--such as California poppies, or perennials--such as low water sages, may be planted.

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