

Plants to Look For

Frank Simerly

THE GENUS *Acacia*, a member of the legume or pea family, comprises a large group of shrubs and trees mostly from the tropics or warm temperature regions. It has been estimated that there are more than 500 species of this genus, over fifty percent of them from Australia. The Los Angeles State and County Arboretum has 124 species and 11 varieties of acacia, the largest collection in the United States. *Acacia* leaves are usually bipinnate, but frequently the leaf-like structure that we observe is actually a leaf stem, or petiole, that has assumed the shape and activity of a leaf, and is called a phyllodia. Flowers are mostly yellow and generally appear in the late winter and early spring.

Acacias found their way into California about the same time as the gold rush, more than one hundred years ago. Since that time, they have come to be one of the most valuable ornamental plants in the California landscape. They can be found in beach plantings, growing on hillsides, and along our freeways, in addition to the multitude of uses they have in the home garden and in park landscapes. It would be impossible in a short article to mention all of the acacia species and varieties that can be seen in the Los Angeles County area, or especially the numerous ones found at the Arboretum. However, here are some species to look for.

The most common of the acacias seen

in the California area is *Acacia baileyana* which is prized for its blue-gray foliage and yellow clusters of flowers that appear profusely in January and February. It is a prominent plant in all of our facilities. *Acacia longifolia* is frequently seen in freeway and home plantings and is a large rounded shrub that blooms in early summer.

On your visits this spring to the Arboretum, Descanso Gardens, and South Coast Botanic Gardens, we suggest you look for some of the more unusual acacias. For example, all three facilities have excellent specimens of *Acacia pendula*. It is a weeping acacia that has an interesting structural form and a graceful character that makes it attractive to all who see it. Its mature height is about 25 feet, foliage is a blue-gray with leaves to four inches long. It blooms erratically with small yellow flowers in pairs or clusters that appear usually in April or May. The flowers are not, however, the redeeming feature of this plant; it is its graceful weeping habit that makes it so attractive. There is a fine mature specimen of *A. pendula* in the Rose Garden at Descanso Gardens. Several small, but well-formed specimens can be seen at South Coast Botanic Garden just a short walk from the tram waiting area. And at the Arboretum there are specimens in various locations. A handsome one is on the walk approaching the Demonstration

Acacia cardiophylla

This specimen in the Australian Section of the Arboretum was planted in November, 1955, from seed brought from New South Wales by Dr. Samuel Ayres, Jr. The species was introduced to the nursery trade by the Arboretum in 1961.

*A. cardiophylla*

ACACIA SPECIES RECOMMENDED BY ARBORETUM HORTICULTURISTS

SPECIES	GROWTH	LEAVES	FLOWERS	USE
<i>A. armata</i>	Shrub 10 to 12'	Small, light green	Few, single, Feb.-Mar.	Thorny branches, good barrier.
<i>A. baileyana</i>	Tree 30'	Finely cut, blue-gray	Profuse, fragrant, Jan.-Feb.	Garden landscape and street tree
<i>A. baileyana</i> 'Purpurea'	Tree 30'	Finely cut, lavender-gray	Profuse, fragrant	Garden landscape and street tree
<i>A. cardiophylla</i>	Shrub 10'	Fern-like, small	Numerous, small yellow flowers in spring	Long arching branches.
<i>A. cultiformis</i>	Shrub 15'	Small gray	Clusters, March	Screen or on banks.
<i>A. cyanophylla</i>	Tree or shrub 30'	Long, narrow, blue-gray	Profuse, dark yellow. Mar.	Home garden or on banks.
<i>A. cyclops</i>	Shrub 20'	Narrow, dark green	Small inconspicuous in Mar.-Apr.	Screen, graceful foliage.
<i>A. dealbata</i>	Tree 50'	Feathery, silver-gray	Fragrant clusters, Feb.-Mar.	Hardy, fast grower.
<i>A. dentata</i>	Shrub 6'	Small, tooth-shaped	Profuse, Jan.-Feb.	Low hedge.
<i>A. elata</i>	Tree 80'	Long, dark green	Clusters. Spring	Fast growing.
<i>A. farnesiana</i>	Tree 20'	Fine, deciduous	Fragrant, Jan.-Apr.	Thorny, good in desert.
<i>A. florabunda</i> (retinoides)	Tree or Shrub 20'	Large, light green	Small clusters, unpredictable time.	Good screen.
<i>A. glandulicarpa</i>	Shrub 8'	Small, green	Fragrant, very profuse in Mar.-Apr.	Compact, good in home garden.
<i>A. longifolia</i>	Large Shrub to 20'	Long, bright green	Profuse in summer.	Fast, tolerant of moist conditions. Good screen.
<i>A. pendula</i>	Tree 25'	Weeping branches, gray foliage	Erratic flowering.	Graceful, weeping habit. Excellent.
<i>A. podalyriaefolia</i>	Tree 20'	Silver-gray	Numerous, Mar.-Apr.	Fine for home garden.
<i>A. saligna</i>	Tree 20'	Long, dark green	Profuse, March	Fast growth, nice weeping habit.
<i>A. subprosa</i>	Tree 25'	Soft green	Moderate bloom, Jan.-Apr.	Excellent. Weeping habit.
<i>A. verticillata</i>	Shrub 15'	Dark green, needle-like	Small spikes, Apr.-May.	Low screen, good at coast.
<i>A. vestita</i>	Shrub 6'	Bluish, grayish-green	Rich yellow, lemon color	Rounded, well-filled shrub.

Home Gardens. There are two fine young specimens that are an integral part of the Aquatic Gardens on top of Tallac Knoll, and other plants of this species can be found in the Australian section of the Arboretum. *A. pendula* does not seed readily and consequently is not found as frequently in the trade as it should be. However, it is a favorite with landscape architects and with plantsmen who are familiar with its habits.

Another beautiful acacia species that the Arboretum highly recommends is *A. podalyriaefolia*, commonly called the 'Pearl Acacia.' Also a small tree achieving a maximum height of something like 20 feet at maturity, it has a rounded head, the foliage is again a silvery-gray, soft and lovely to the touch as well as to look upon. The flowers are large, fluffy, and a very clear light yellow born in far greater numbers than on *A. pendula*. *A. podalyriaefolia* could be a large shrub as well as a small tree and is desirable because it is one of the earlier acacias to come into flower, sometime beginning as early as December depending on the area and climate. The oldest planting of *A. podalyriaefolia* at the Arboretum was in the extreme northwest corner of the Australian section. These trees recently died, but because it is such a desirable species young plants have been planted next to the tram road in the north central part of the Australian section. *A. podalyriaefolia* can also be seen at the South Coast Botanic Garden but does not seem to perform quite as well in the coastal influence. It is located on the west side of the garden there. In the same location you can see the finest specimen of *A. pendula* that South Coast has to offer. Close by the *A. pendula* which is just west of the center of the lake is another species that is most unusual, *A. subprosa*. It is a 25-foot-high tree that flowers in January and on through April with creamy yellow flowers. It has a weeping

habit and extremely soft green foliage. The foliage is the attractive feature of the plant. It is a multiple trunk tree that is worthy of your attention.

One other acacia that you should look for this spring is *A. cardiophylla*. This acacia was introduced by the Arboretum in 1961 and is an excellent plant for banks and screens. It should be a valuable asset to freeway planters. It grows 12 to 14 feet in height and almost the same width, branching right down to the ground making extremely dense and handsome screens. Flowers may appear anywhere from January through April. You may find this Arboretum introduction growing as a screen along the Flood Control Channel at the western edge of the Australian/South African sections, and also growing as a screen around a portion of the nursery area.

It is unfortunate that with the literally hundreds of handsome acacia species that exist, the nursery industry lists only three or four on the average. If a person is really interested in seeking out unusual acacia species in nurseries, perhaps ten or twelve may be located. When you visit the Arboretum or the other Department gardens to see the acacias, you'll be surprised to find many not mentioned in this article that are truly outstanding horticultural specimens, and one wonders why they are not available. Perhaps one point that influences the availability is the fact that nearly all acacias are relatively short lived. By this we mean that they may live for only twenty or thirty years; however, they compensate for this feature by being generally very rapidly growing plants. So, for example, *A. podalyriaefolia* may grow in three or four years to a mature size. This would certainly compensate for its short life span.

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