



Aralia spinosa Devils-Walkingstick¹

Edward F. Gilman and Dennis G. Watson²

INTRODUCTION

Anyone who has accidentally brushed against a Devil's-Walkingstick does not soon forget the experience, for this tall, spindly native shrub or small tree is armed up and down its thin trunk with extremely sharp, treacherous spines (Fig. 1). Even the huge, much-divided leaves, which can reach four feet long and three feet wide, are armed with pointed prickles, ready to scratch anyone who comes within range. But when placed in an area where they can do no harm, Devil's-Walkingsticks add a tropical effect to a mixed shrubby border or other naturalized setting, where the large leaves can easily spread out to their full length atop the slender, 10 to 15-foot-tall trunks. Under ideal conditions, these small trees can even reach 25 to 30 feet tall.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Scientific name: *Aralia spinosa*
Pronunciation: uh-RAIL-ee-uh spy-NO-suh
Common name(s): Devils-Walkingstick, Hercules-Club
Family: *Araliaceae*
USDA hardiness zones: 5 through 9A (Fig. 2)
Origin: native to North America
Uses: reclamation plant; specimen
Availability: grown in small quantities by a small number of nurseries

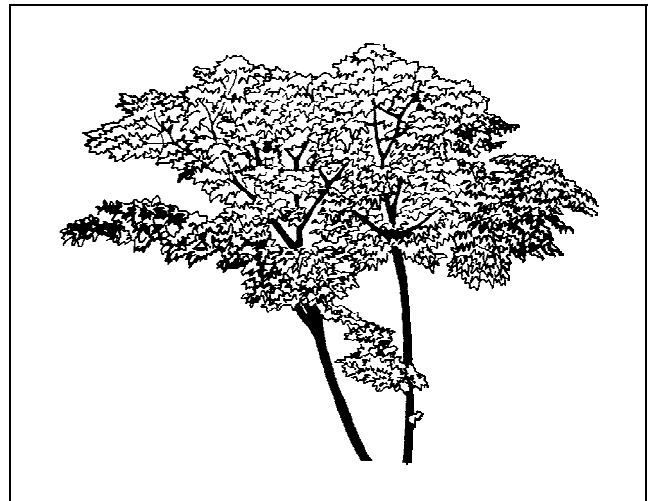


Figure 1. Mature Devils-Walkingstick.

DESCRIPTION

Height: 10 to 15 feet
Spread: 6 to 10 feet
Crown uniformity: irregular outline or silhouette
Crown shape: upright
Crown density: open
Growth rate: medium
Texture: fine

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate (Fig. 3)
Leaf type: bipinnately compound; odd pinnately compound
Leaflet margin: serrate
Leaflet shape: ovate
Leaflet venation: pinnate

1. This document is adapted from Fact Sheet ST-80, a series of the Environmental Horticulture Department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Publication date: November 1993.
2. Edward F. Gilman, associate professor, Environmental Horticulture Department; Dennis G. Watson, associate professor, Agricultural Engineering Department, Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville FL 32611.

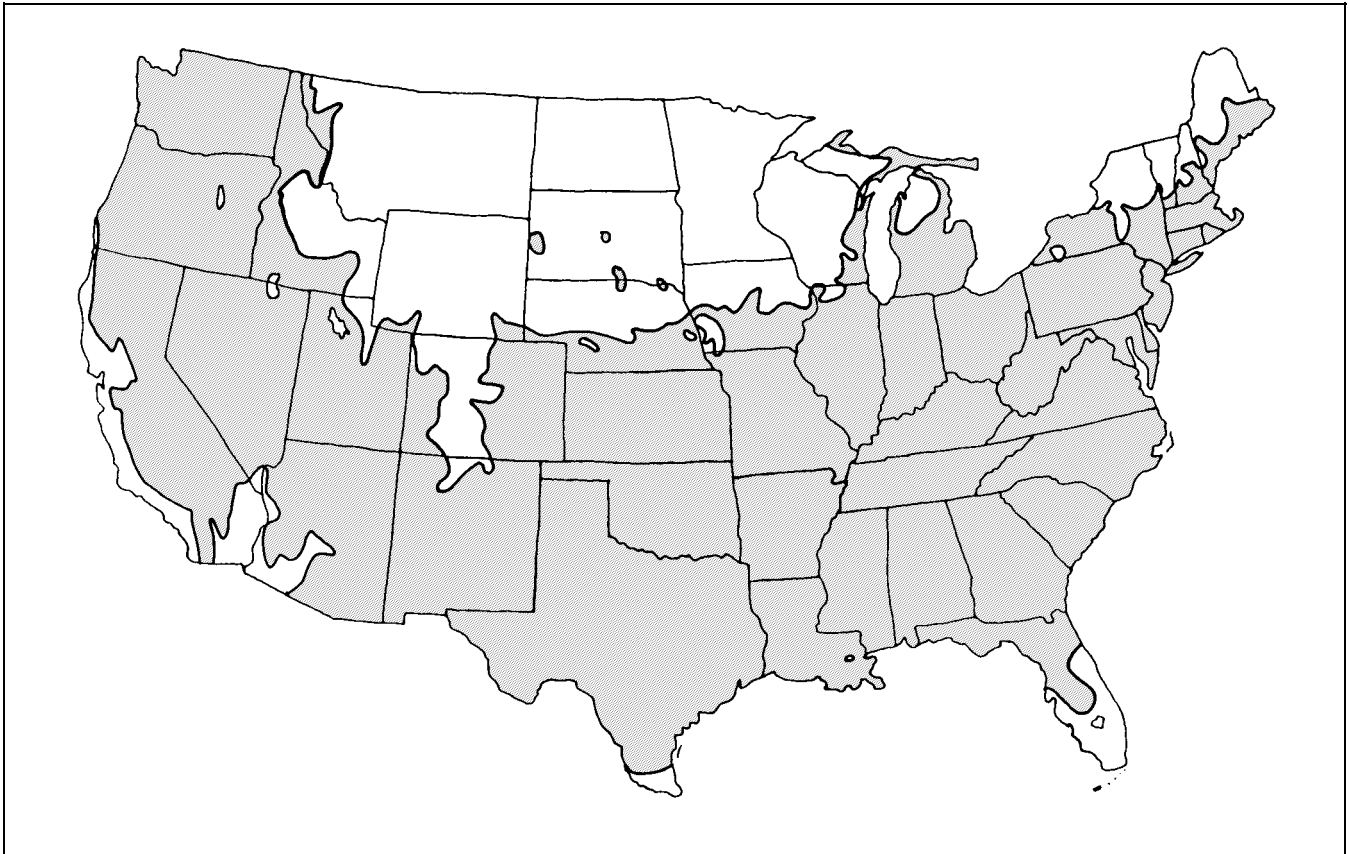


Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

Leaf type and persistence: deciduous

Leaflet blade length: 2 to 4 inches

Leaf color: green

Fall color: copper; red

Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: white

Flower characteristics: showy; summer flowering

Fruit

Fruit shape: round

Fruit length: < .5 inch

Fruit covering: fleshy

Fruit color: black; purple

Fruit characteristics: attracts birds; inconspicuous and not showy; no significant litter problem

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: routinely grown with, or trainable to be grown with, multiple trunks; grow mostly upright and will not droop; not particularly showy; tree wants to grow with several trunks but can

be trained to grow with a single trunk; thorns are present on the trunk or branches

Pruning requirement: requires pruning to develop strong structure

Breakage: susceptible to breakage either at the crotch due to poor collar formation, or the wood itself is weak and tends to break

Current year twig color: brown; gray

Current year twig thickness: stout

Culture

Light requirement: tree grows in part shade/part sun; tree grows in full sun

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

Drought tolerance: moderate

Other

Roots: surface roots are usually not a problem

Winter interest: no special winter interest

Outstanding tree: not particularly outstanding

Invasive potential: seeds itself into the landscape

Pest resistance: no pests are normally seen on the tree

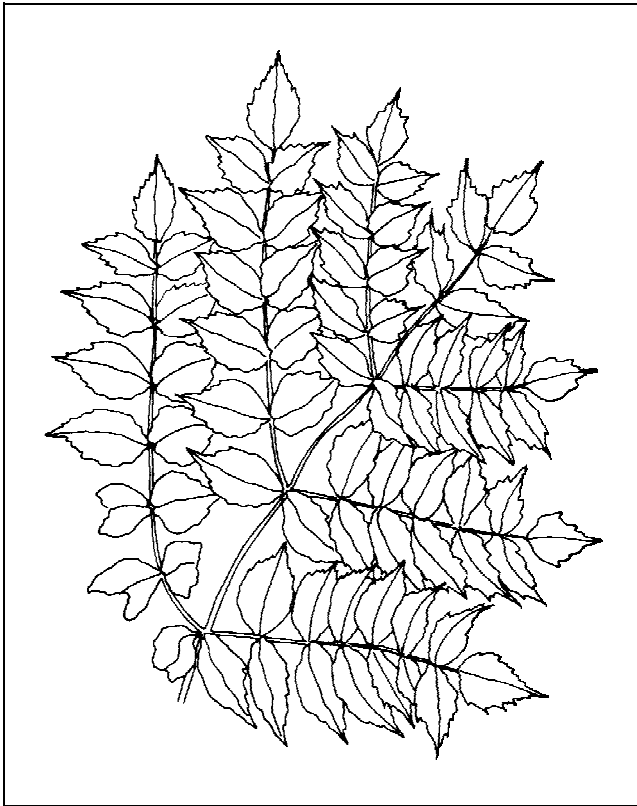


Figure 3. Foliage of Devils-Walkingstick.

USE AND MANAGEMENT

The young leaves of Devil's-Walkingstick are bronze-colored, green in summer but return to a bronze/red mottled with some yellow before dropping in fall. As striking as the thorns are the large, summertime panicles of bloom, 12 to 18 inches in diameter and up to three feet long, held above the crown of leaves for about 10 days and gently draping outward under the weight of the flower head. Following these blooms is the production of a great quantity of dark, purple-black, juicy berries which are exceptionally popular with birds.

Devil's-Walkingstick is quite easy to grow and literally thrives on neglect. Plants should be grown in full sun or partial shade on any almost any kind of soil, acid or alkaline, moist or dry, as long as it is well-drained, and it is frequently found along stream banks and road sides. Devil's-Walkingstick grows rapidly and usually spreads by sprouts produced from its base, eventually creating an impenetrable thicket if left to its own devices. While the temptation would be to use this plant as a barrier planting, the effect of the thorned, naked trunks during wintertime is quite harsh and perhaps unattractive to some people. The plant can be trained into a small, single or multi-stemmed tree and used in a shrubbery border to add height and

interest, or left to create a thicket. It is not normally available in nurseries. It can be transplanted during winter and used as a specimen in an out-of-the-way place where it is sure to capture the curiosity of many visitors, particularly when it is in flower.

Propagation is by seed, sucker-division, or root cuttings, and plants are easily transplanted. A smaller, non-thorny selection of this plant would make a nice, native alternative to the ever-popular nandina shrub.

Pests and Diseases

No pests or diseases are of major concern.