



Cooperative Extension Service  
Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences

## *Prunus americana*<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

Growing 20 feet tall and wide, American Plum forms a rounded mass of slender, thorny branches sprouting from a short trunk. In spring, before the 1 to 2-inch-long leaves appear, American Plum is festooned with small, white, fragrant flowers which make the trees quite decorative in the presence of other trees which are often still dormant. The 0.5-inch-diameter fruits which follow are red, ripening to yellow, and are extremely popular with wildlife and man. The plums are either eaten fresh or used to make a delicious jelly.

### General Information

**Scientific name:** *Prunus americana*

**Pronunciation:** PROO-nus uh-mair-ih-KAY-nuh

**Common name(s):** American Plum

**Family:** *Rosaceae*

**Plant type:** tree

**USDA hardiness zones:** 3B through 8 (Fig. 1)

**Planting month for zone 7:** year round

**Planting month for zone 8:** year round

**Origin:** native to Florida

**Uses:** near a deck or patio; specimen; attracts butterflies

**Availability:** grown in small quantities by a small number of nurseries

### Description

**Height:** 15 to 20 feet

**Spread:** 12 to 18 feet

**Plant habit:** round

**Plant density:** moderate

**Growth rate:** moderate

**Texture:** medium

### Foliage

**Leaf arrangement:** alternate

**Leaf type:** simple

**Leaf margin:** serrate

**Leaf shape:** ovate; obovate

**Leaf venation:** pinnate; reticulate

**Leaf type and persistence:** deciduous

**Leaf blade length:** 2 to 4 inches

**Leaf color:** green

**Fall color:** yellow

**Fall characteristic:** showy

### Flower

**Flower color:** white

**Flower characteristic:** spring flowering

### Fruit

**Fruit shape:** round

**Fruit length:** .5 to 1 inch

**Fruit cover:** fleshy

**Fruit color:** yellow

**Fruit characteristic:** attracts birds

### Trunk and Branches

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**Figure 1.** Shaded area represents potential planting range.

**Trunk/bark/branches:** typically multi-trunked or clumping stems; thorns present; can be trained to grow with a short, single trunk

**Current year stem/twig color:** brown

**Current year stem/twig thickness:** thin

## Culture

**Light requirement:** plant grows in part shade/part sun

**Soil tolerances:** acidic; alkaline; sand; loam; clay;

**Drought tolerance:** high

**Soil salt tolerances:** unknown

**Plant spacing:** 36 to 60 inches

## Other

**Roots:** usually not a problem

**Winter interest:** no special winter interest

**Outstanding plant:** not particularly outstanding

**Invasive potential:** native plant that often reproduces into nearby landscapes

**Pest resistance:** long-term health usually not affected by pests

## Use and Management

Grown occasionally with a short, single leader and used as a patio or residential landscape tree, American Plum is usually seen with a multiple trunk planted as a specimen or in a median strip, or planted on 15 to 25-foot-centers along the entrance road to a commercial property. It tends to sprout from the base of the trunk, forming multi-stemmed thickets. This is the form most commonly seen in its native habitat on old fields and on other disturbed sites. These may need to be removed regularly to help keep the plant looking neat. It makes a nice addition to the shrub border in the back yard. The crown often leans to one side or the other. Occasional pruning can significantly improve the form of the crown.

A North American native tree, American Plum is very easily grown and has no special cultural requirements. It tolerates drought, sandy or clayey soil but does poorly in alkaline pH. These small trees grow quickly but have a relatively short life. This should not stop you from planting the tree since it will serve the landscape well during its life.

Propagation is by seed or cuttings.

**Pests and Diseases**

No pests or diseases are of major concern. Tent caterpillar can defoliate trees and could weaken them with repeated defoliations.