Prunus americana

Edward F. Gilman

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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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.