



desert place

Natural beauty  
through preservation

Presented by:  
CONSERVATION COMMITTEE of the  
Cave Creek Improvement Association

Sentinel - 15 May 1985  
by Jo Walker

The ironwood tree, *Olneya tesota*, is one of the most attractive native desert trees. It is found in sandy or graveled washes or canyons of the deserts in Arizona, California and Mexico from sea level to 2,500 feet or more.

A frost-tender plant, its presence has been used as an indication of good location for citrus trees. Ironwood is a tree to value if you have one on your property — especially in the years it blooms with a profusion of violet-to-white pea-blossom-shaped flowers in late May or early June, putting on a spectacular show.

Depending on the rainfall, some years it may not bloom at all. A member of the legume family, tan, thick-walled seed pods develop with one to six seeds. Try harvesting a few pods on July 4. (Never gather all the seeds of any desert plant — leave some for the birds and animals, and some to grow new plants.) Cut or file the hard seed to expose the inner part, plant in a can and water (this imitates the rough handling the seed would receive during the summer rainstorms, when they are tumbled down the washes).

With luck, you may get seedlings started for your yard. They will develop slowly into multi-trunked trees with grey trunks and stems; the bark darkens with age. Evergreen (except in severe drought or frost), the grey-green leaflets, in two to six pairs, have a pair of 1/2-inch long, straight spines at the base.

Ironwood will eventually reach 20-30 feet in height and width. The wood is brittle, hard and remarkably heavy, thus earning the title "Palo-de-hierro," or stick of iron.

To learn more about the desert ironwood, and other native or drought-resistant plants, some books you may find interesting are:

**Trees and Shrubs of the Southwestern Deserts**, by Lyman Benson and Robert Darrow; third edition, 1981, University of Arizona Press, Tucson, Ariz.; 416 pages.

**Woody Plants of the Southwest**, by Samuel Lamb; 1975, The Sunstone Press, Santa Fe, N.M.; 177 pages.

**An Illustrated Guide to Landscape Plants of Southern Arizona**, by Ronald Dinchak; 1980,

Organpipe Publishers, Mesa, Ariz; 297 pages.

**Plants for Dry Climates**, by Mary Rose Duffield and Warren D. Jones; 1981, H.P. Books, Tucson, Ariz.; 176 pages.

**Trees, Shrubs and Woody Vines of the Southwest**, by Robert Vines; 1960, University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas; 1,104 pages.