

On the Wild Side – May, 2010
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Acacia constricta – Whitethorn Acacia

Acacias in general are native to the tropics or warm regions of the world – Australia, Mexico, and the southwestern United States. Whitethorn acacia is a southwest native that grows from Arizona to western Texas and south to Baja, California. It is found in washes, gravelly plains and rocky hillsides between 1,500 and 6,500 feet in elevation. It is a member of the Fabaceae or Leguminosae (Pea) Family. Whitethorn acacia is a graceful spreading large shrub or small tree that grows 10 feet high and up to 15 feet wide. It is deciduous. It has medium green lacy foliage with twice compound leaves and one-half inch long white spines that form as the plant matures. Branches and new growth are thornless when young, but a pair of spines forms at the base of the leaves as the plant grows. The plant has a mahogany colored bark and is densely branched. This acacia blooms in late spring and sometimes in summer and fall with yellow-orange puffball flowers. The blooms are described as having “a delightful roselike fragrance” and attract pollinators. The nectar makes an excellent honey. Seed pods are reddish brown, curved and pinched or constricted between the seeds. Quail and many other birds eat the seeds. This is a good plant for wildlife habitat use. Plant it in an area where you want a natural look in a transition zone or an outer zone of a xeriscape landscape. It is a desert plant valued for its texture and summer flowers.

Whitethorn acacia is cold hardy to 5 degrees Fahrenheit. It prefers a sunny location and well drained soil, but tolerates alkaline soils and caliche. It is very drought tolerant. In a garden setting water it once a month from late spring through summer. The seeds germinate easily and you will need to control volunteer plants. These plants tend to form thickets in nature. Whitethorn acacia is one of the few species that forms nitrogen-fixing nodules on its roots in soils of high heat with salty conditions. The plants grow at a slow to moderate rate. Many are short lived with life spans of twenty to thirty years. Catclaw acacia (*Acacia greggii*) is the only species of acacia that is native to California.

You will find a Whitethorn acacia planted in the demonstration garden at the Maturango Museum. If you want to buy one, plants are available for sale at the Antelope Valley Conservation District Nursery on Ave I in Lancaster, or you may find it on the preorder sales form for the native plant sale sponsored by Desert Mountain RC&D and Oasis Garden Club in the fall.

Facts for this article were obtained from the following sources:

Cool Plants for Hot Gardens – Greg Starr

Native Plants for Southwestern Landscapes – Judy Mielke

Shrubs and Trees of the Southwest Deserts – Janice Emily Bowers

Trees and Shrubs for Dry California Landscapes – Bob Perry

Trees and Shrubs for the Southwest – Mary Irish