**Parkinsonia aculeata**

Jerusalem-Thorn

Edward F. Gilman and Dennis G. Watson

**INTRODUCTION**

Loose, flowing, delicate leaflets, a light, airy, low-branching growth habit with pendulous branch-tips, and a profusion of small, slightly fragrant, yellow blooms combine to create this popular, small landscape tree (Fig. 1). Quickly reaching a height of 20 to 25 feet with a similar spread, this multitrunked deciduous tree is actually much stronger than its fragile appearance would suggest. Branch bark often remains bright green even on several-year-old limbs.

**GENERAL INFORMATION**

- **Scientific name:** Parkinsonia aculeata
- **Pronunciation:** par-kin-SO-nee-uh
- **Common name(s):** Jerusalem-Thorn, Retama
- **Family:** Leguminosae
- **USDA hardiness zones:** 8B through 11 (Fig. 2)
- **Origin:** not native to North America
- **Uses:** large parking lot islands (> 200 square feet in size); medium-sized parking lot islands (100-200 square feet in size); recommended for buffer strips around parking lots or for median strip plantings in the highway; small parking lot islands (< 100 square feet in size); specimen; residential street tree; tree has been successfully grown in urban areas where air pollution, poor drainage, compacted soil, and/or drought are common
- **Availability:** generally available in many areas within its hardiness range

**DESCRIPTION**

- **Height:** 15 to 20 feet
- **Spread:** 20 to 25 feet
- **Crown uniformity:** irregular outline or silhouette
- **Crown shape:** spreading; vase shape
- **Crown density:** open
- **Growth rate:** fast
- **Texture:** fine

**Foliage**

- **Leaf arrangement:** alternate (Fig. 3)
- **Leaf type:** odd pinnately compound
- **Leaflet margin:** entire
- **Leaflet shape:** linear; oblanceolate
- **Leaflet venation:** none, or difficult to see
- **Leaf type and persistence:** deciduous
- **Leaflet blade length:** less than 2 inches
- **Leaf color:** green
- **Fall color:** no fall color change

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**Fall characteristic:** not showy

**Flower**

**Flower color:** yellow  
**Flower characteristics:** pleasant fragrance; spring flowering; summer flowering; very showy

**Fruit**

**Fruit shape:** pod  
**Fruit length:** 3 to 6 inches; 1 to 3 inches  
**Fruit covering:** dry or hard  
**Fruit color:** brown  
**Fruit characteristics:** does not attract wildlife; no significant litter problem; persistent on the tree; showy

**Trunk and Branches**

**Trunk/bark/branches:** bark is thin and easily damaged from mechanical impact; droop as the tree grows, and will require pruning for vehicular or pedestrian clearance beneath the canopy; routinely grown with, or trainable to be grown with, multiple trunks; showy trunk; thorns are present on the trunk or branches

**Pruning requirement:** requires pruning to develop strong structure  
**Breakage:** resistant  
**Current year twig color:** green  
**Current year twig thickness:** medium; thin

**Culture**

**Light requirement:** tree grows in full sun  
**Soil tolerances:** clay; loam; sand; acidic; alkaline; well-drained  
**Drought tolerance:** high  
**Aerosol salt tolerance:** high

**Other**

**Roots:** surface roots are usually not a problem  
**Winter interest:** no special winter interest  
**Outstanding tree:** tree has outstanding ornamental features and could be planted more  
**Invasive potential:** little, if any, potential at this time  
**Pest resistance:** no pests are normally seen on the tree

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**Figure 2.** Shaded area represents potential planting range.
USE AND MANAGEMENT

Be sure to purchase trees with a well-developed central leader and upright branches for street and parking lot plantings to allow for clearance for vehicles. This can be a tough chore as branches weep toward the ground as they spread from the tree so older specimens can be wider than tall. Open-grown trees are beautiful if left unpruned, forming a fountain of fine texture. The stems are armed with short, sharp spines and the trees should be located where they will not injure passersby.

Thriving in full sun on any well-drained soil, Jerusalem-Thorn will tolerate heat, drought, alkaline soil, and salt but not wet, soggy soil. It will grow in clay only if it drains very well. In spite of its rapid growth rate, it has strong wood, withstanding harsh winds with ease due to the open growth habit. However, the trees have a short life, approximately 15 to 20 years. Poor drainage may account for short life on many sites, so locate it accordingly in areas where soil is never wet for more than an hour or two. The bark is thin and easily injured and the tree appears to compartmentalize decay poorly. Locate the tree properly and design the site to minimize trunk injury.

Adapted to arid regions, Jerusalem-Thorn is one of the best choices for hot, dry locations and its salt-tolerance makes it ideal for seaside plantings. The light shade afforded by the fine-textured foliage allows lawns to thrive beneath this tree and its small size allows a multitude of applications, from specimen, parking lot, median, or street tree, set back from the road or walk. There are reports of the plant escaping cultivation in some locations along the gulf coast.

Propagation is by seed.

Pests

Some pests of Jerusalen Thorn are scales and thorn bugs, but none are serious.

Diseases

One disease that infects this tree on wet soils is root rot but none are serious on other sites.

Witches-broom occasionally causes a proliferation of branches forming tight heads of foliage.