

# CAMPUS ARBORETUM



Focus on:  
*Olneya tesota*  
"desert ironwood"  
Fabaceae



*Olneya tesota* is known locally in the Sonoran desert as "Ironwood" or by the Spanish common name palo de hierro. These names point to the use of ironwood trees as a source of very dense, hard wood. The heartwood is a rich brown and somewhat variegated and the sapwood provides a thin layer of yellowish white, having an irregular grain with a good luster when polished. The wood is very hard and strong (reportedly as hard as ebony) and is dense/heavy enough to sink in water. Only leadwood ( *Krugiodendron ferrum* ), a small tropical tree of southern Florida, is heavier.

Ironwood is the tallest growing tree in the Sonoran Desert and provides a beneficial micro-habitat for many desert species. As such, these are considered "nurse" trees in the Sonoran Desert. Animals gather in the shade during the hottest months and other cacti and small shrubs utilize the tree's canopy as shelter from the sun. Like other members of the family Ironwood, it is a tree that gathers nitrogen from the soil, so leaf litter and seeds are



particularly rich in nutrients.

To learn more, visit this Campus Arboretum Species Description Page found at: <https://apps.cals.arizona.edu/arboretum/taxon.aspx?id=190>



#### **Ecological and Ethnobotanical Value:**

Ironwood flowers and seeds are edible. The flowers bloom in late April-May and seed pods set in June-July. Flowers can be eaten raw in salads or candied for use in desserts. Although the seeds can be eaten raw, both green and dry/brown stages of seeds are most easily digested when blanched, sprouted or cooked. The seeds, which are usually eaten lightly roasted have a slightly sweet and nutty flavor, similar to the taste of peanuts. They are very high in protein (~ 19% protein) as well as carbohydrate (~61%) and fat (~10%) and more digestible compared to other legume beans. As such, ironwood seeds may have potential to be commercially produced for human food but do contain small amounts of trypsin inhibitors, phenols, alkaloids and haemagglutinin, known collectively as “antinutrients” requiring removal by soaking or cooking to reduce risk.



Ironwood seed pods are covered with brown fuzz.



The silvery foliage and purple flowers of desert ironwood contrast beautifully with the paloverde trees which bloom around the same time of year.



Thanks for joining me on my journey to see and understand trees! The health of the planet and our fellow humans depends on



respectful and understanding tree selection choices. I hope you're inspired to deepen the connection by visiting campus. and using the [interactive arboretum map](#) to find the tree featured in this spotlight for a more immersive education and sensory experience.

Enjoy!

Tanya

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