

Plant Profile: Devil's Walking Stick

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Aralia spinosa is a woody plant that is native to the eastern United States. The Devil's Walking Stick is an aromatic deciduous shrub or small tree which grows from 6 to 26 feet in height, with slender trunks of 5 to 8 inches in diameter. The large, lacy compound leaves range from 28 to 47 inches in length. The plants grow in clusters of trunks, resembling a thicket. The young stems are straight and sturdy and the trunk is covered with sharp spines that protect the plant from animals eating the



leaves or brushing against them. Thorns are also found along the petioles and leaf midribs. The plant is primarily branchless, with leaves growing at the top in a cluster, giving a palm-like appearance. When branches do appear, they are most often at right angles to the trunk.



A. spinosa produces tiny creamy white flowers in the late summer, with a small purplish-black berry which ripen in the fall. The flowers and fruit develop in heavy clusters, and may have both male or female flowers on the same plant; the flowers have a pleasant lemony scent. The huge, compound leaves are the largest of all trees native to North America. In the fall, the foliage turns a striking bronze color.



The range of the *A. spinosa* in the eastern United States is quite broad, ranging from New York to Florida, and westward to Illinois and Texas. *A. spinosa* was introduced into cultivation in 1688. Prior to that date, Iroquois Indians planted *A. spinosa* saplings around their villages to protect their gardens and fruit from animals. Young leaves can be finely chopped, boiled, and eaten as a leafy green vegetable if gathered before the prickles on the leaves harden. Early European settlers used the leaves of the *A. spinosa* to ease the pain of toothaches.

The Devil's Walking Stick is an interesting addition to a pollinator garden, and in areas where deer are a problem. The plant is highly resistant to deer. The nectar blooms are a

favorite with butterflies, bees, and other insects. The fruit provides food for songbirds, small mammals, foxes, raccoons, and others. It is easily transplantable, and grows well in a variety of soil types. Care should be used when transplanting, however, as individuals may have an allergic skin reaction to handling the bark and roots of the plant.

In Cave Hill, the Devil's Walking Stick can be found in Section 10 and on the south end of the Main Lake.