



Alabama's *TREASURED Forests*
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Devil's Walking Stick

(*Aralia spinosa*)

By Fred Nation, Environmental Services, Baldwin County

Devil's walking stick (*Aralia spinosa*), is an attractive deciduous shrub or small tree to about 30 feet tall. The leaves are very large, compound, often to 4 feet long, closely arranged together around the tops of the stems, to create a distinctive umbrella-like appearance. Even more than the huge leaves, the most unforgettable feature of *Aralia* is the armor. The stout twigs and even the leaves are abundantly armed with sharp, stiff prickles that will surely make any physical contact an unforgettable experience!

In the late nineteenth century, the Victorians had a taste for strange and unusual plants in their gardens, and they sometimes planted *Aralia* as a "grotesque." The large creamy white, lemon-scented inflorescence in midsummer, followed by masses of small, dark purple berries are all quite handsome, and might be interesting in today's landscapes, in an out-of-the-way location where the prickles can be avoided. The fruits provide good forage for songbirds and small animals. Devil's walking stick is native to the eastern United States, from New York to East Texas, south to the Gulf Coast. Throughout Alabama, it is found mostly in rich, moist forested areas.

The Choctaw Indians used the aromatic roots of *Aralia spinosa* to treat boils, and old American herbals mention extensive uses and medical actions. It is frequently listed as a stimulant, and as a diaphoretic, to promote sweating. The following is just part of the *Aralia* entry in *A Modern Herbal*, by M. Grieve, published in 1931:

"Fresh bark causes vomiting and purging, but dried is a stimulating alterative [an herb traditionally used to 'purify' the blood]. A tincture made from the bark is used for rheumatism, skin diseases and syphilis. The berries in tincture form, lull pain in decayed teeth and in other parts of the body, violent colic and rheumatism, useful in cholera when a cathartic is required . . .

Also a powerful sialogogue [increases saliva] and valuable in diseases where mouth and throat get dry, and for sore throat; will relieve difficult breathing and produce moisture if given in very small doses of the powder. The bark, root, and berries can all be utilized."

Plant relationships, based mostly on flower structure, are interesting and often quite surprising. For example, who would think that two of *Aralia's* family relations are English ivy, an exotic woody vine, and Ginseng, the rare, world-famous medicinal herbal species!

Devil's walking stick is somewhat similar in appearance to another prickly, though larger, Southeastern native: Hercules club, *Xanthoxylum clava-herculis*. Although both have been used to treat toothache – in fact, one common name for *Xanthoxylum* is "toothache tree" – the two species are unrelated.

According to the American Forests organization, the national champion is 31 inches in circumference, 38 feet tall, with an average crown of 40 feet, located in the Pisgah National Forest, south of Asheville, North Carolina. The Alabama Forestry Commission does not consider *Aralia spinosa* to be a tree, and does not recognize a state champion for this species. ♣



Photos by Fred Nation