

## American Plum



# American Plum (*Prunus americana*)

## General Description

The wild plum is a native tall shrub to small tree which is thorny, winter-hardy, and thicket-forming. Edible fruit used to make preserves and jellies.

### Leaves and Buds

Bud Arrangement - Alternate.

Bud Color - Brown to dark brown.

Bud Size - 1/8 to 1/4 inch.

Leaf Type and Shape - Simple leaves, elliptical to oblong-ovate.

Leaf Margins - Margins are sharply and often doubly-serrate.

Leaf Surface - Smooth to slightly hairy along the midrib beneath.

Leaf Length - 2 to 4 inches.

Leaf Width - 1 to 2 inches.

Leaf Color - Medium green, changing to yellow or reddish in autumn.

### Flowers and Fruits

Flower Type - Cross-pollinating, fascicles.

Flower Color - White.

Fruit Type - Drupe, seed is a compressed stone.

Fruit Color - Fruits are subglobose, red to yellow when mature.

### Form

Growth Habit - Round-headed crown, suckers freely.

Texture - Medium, summer; medium, winter.

Crown Height - 8 to 10 feet.

Crown Width - 8 to 10 feet.

Bark Color - Grayish-black and becomes quite scaly on older plants.

Root System - Somewhat shallow, wider than crown spread.

## Environmental Requirements

### Soils

Soil Texture - Adapted to a wide variety of soil types.

Soil pH - 5.5 to 7.5.

Windbreak Suitability Group - 1, 3, 4, 4C, 5.

### Cold Hardiness

USDA Zone 3.

### Water

Fair to good drought tolerance.

### Light

Full sun to partial shade.

## Uses

### Conservation/Windbreaks

Medium to tall shrub for farmstead windbreaks, highway and riparian plantings.

### Wildlife

Important to songbirds and animals for nesting, loafing, and bedding area. Fruit is not a preferred food for songbirds and game birds. Twigs and foliage browsed by deer.

### Agroforestry Products

Food - Fruit eaten fresh and processed as preserves and jellies.

Medicinal - Used by Native Americans to treat skin abrasions.

### Urban/Recreational

Used for naturalizing and border plantings. Suckers profusely which is objectionable in home landscapes.

## Cultivated Varieties

*Prunus* x 'Alderman', 'Pipestone', 'Tecumseh', 'Toka', 'Underwood', and 'Waneta' are fruiting cultivars of plums.

## Related Species

Beach Plum (*P. maritima*)

Princess Kay Plum (*P. nigra* 'Princess Kay') - Double white flowers, not very drought tolerant.

## Pests

Common diseases include stem decay, branch cankers, black knot, and plum pockets. Extracts of leaves and flowers are toxic to various insects.



## AMERICAN PLUM

*Prunus americana* Marsh.

Plant Symbol = PRAM

Contributed by: USDA NRCS Plant Materials  
Program



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### Uses

**Windbreaks:** Plant American plum in the central or outside rows where adequate water is available. It may also be planted in single-row windbreaks.

**Wildlife:** American plum is highly important as wildlife cover and food. The thorny, suckering growth, when protected, forms a thicket valuable for bird nesting, loafing, and roosting, and animal loafing and bedding. Twigs and foliage provide a highly preferred browse for whitetail and mule deer.

**Recreation and Beautification:** The thorny growth and suckering characteristics should be considered before planting this species near a recreation area. It can be used for screening and natural barriers. The fruit is used widely for making jams and jellies.

**Ethnobotanic:** American plum was and still is used as a source of food and medicine by Native Americans in the Midwest and West.

### Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's

current status (e.g. threatened or endangered species, state noxious status, and wetland indicator values).

### Description

*Prunus americana* Marsh., American plum, is a deciduous large shrub or small tree with a broad crown, reaching heights up to 15 feet. Fruits are red to yellow, almost globular edible plums about 1 inch in diameter. Flowers are white, 5-petaled, about 1 inch across, and borne singly or in clusters at the juncture of a stem and leaf. Leaves are alternate, broadly oval in shape with a sharply tapering tip, and sharply, often doubly toothed edges; they are generally 2 to 4 inches long on slender stalks, dark green above, pale and smooth below. The plant's numerous stems are grayish and become scaly with age; its branches are more or less spiny with sharp-tipped twigs. The roots of American plum are shallow, widely spreading, and readily sprouting.

### Adaptation and Distribution

Widely distributed over the eastern two thirds of central North America, American plum grows in prairies, woodlands, pastures, and along roadsides and riverbanks. The shrub is winter-hardy, but intolerant of shade and drought; it requires the equivalent of 22 to 25 inches of precipitation.

For a current distribution map, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Web site.

### Establishment

American plum can be planted from seed and is relatively easy to transplant. Plant in well-drained soil.

### Management

Plantings in dry areas must have supplemental water or available ground moisture. Traditional resource managers used burning as a management tool, which eliminated plant competition and provided nutrient enrichment for increased fruit production; branch pruning was also used to increase production.

### Pests and Potential Problems

There are no known serious insect problems; plum pocket and black knot are common diseases, but are generally not serious.

**Cultivars, Improved, and Selected Materials (and area of origin)**

There are many different cultivars of *Prunus* species that have been developed for ornamental flowers and edible fruit.

**Prepared By & Species Coordinator:**  
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For more information about this and other plants, please contact your local NRCS field office or Conservation District, and visit the PLANTS Web site <<http://plants.usda.gov>> or the Plant Materials Program Web site <<http://Plant-Materials.nrcs.usda.gov>>

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## Native plum

*Prunus americana*

**Growth Form:** irregular

**Crown Density:** open

**Size:** to 8 feet high  
to 8 foot spread

**Drought Resistance:** good

**Cold Hardiness:** excellent

**Growth Rate:** rapid

**Life Span:** moderate

**Elevational Range:** to 8,000 feet

**Soil Conditions:** good alkaline tolerance

**Possible Insect Problems:** pear-slugsawfly

**Possible Disease Problems:** fireblight, powdery mildew

**Wildlife Value:** excellent; hoofed browsers; nesting cover and  
food value

**Seasonal Color:** large white flowers in May

**Miscellany:** native; delicious edible fruit for jellies and  
canning; forms a thicket



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Taken from: Trees for Conservation, a buyer's guide, Colorado State Forest Service