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## Our State Tree puts on a show in April

By Laura Murphy

If months were associated with color, April would be yellow. Many of our native desert blooming plants have yellow blossoms. One of the most spectacular and easy to see examples is the Palo Verde tree. It is found throughout the washes and open areas all over town as well as in many landscapes.

The name Palo Verde literally translated means “green stick” in Spanish and is a very appropriate name. All parts of the tree from the leaves to the branches, limbs and trunk are green. These trees are superbly adapted to the desert. They are among the most drought tolerant trees available. When in bloom, the Palo Verde is also one of the most beautiful.



Native to the southwest desert and Mexico, the Palo Verde is the state tree of Arizona. Once established these trees truly need no supplemental water to live. One look around in our washes and open lots will prove that. However, in a landscape setting, some supplemental water will accelerate growth, prevent limb die-back and produce a more lush and attractive tree.

To survive the harsh desert climate, the Palo Verde can do some amazing things. The bark of the tree is green and can photosynthesize something that in most plants only leaves do. This allows the leaves to be very small which decreases water loss through evaporation and transpiration. The leaves can also be shed if extreme drought occurs. During periods of extended drought, small branches will also die back. When water again becomes available, new branches will sprout out.

There are four species and one hybrid tree that are commonly found and go by the name Palo Verde. While all of them have the typical green bark, spines, pods and yellow spring time flowers, there are differences which should be considered when choosing a tree for your landscape.

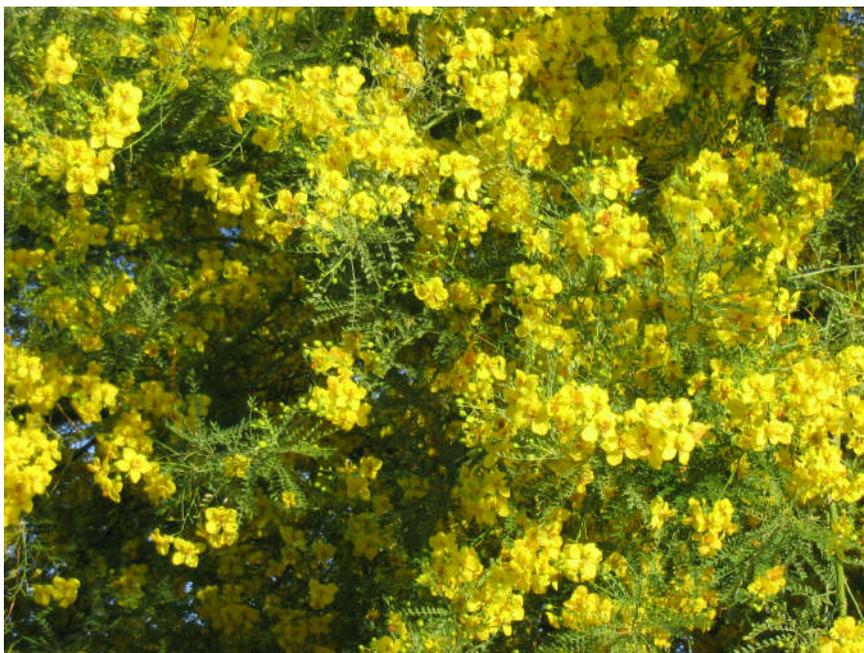
The Blue Palo Verde has a more upright growth habit and a wide spreading crown. It will grow about 30 feet tall and as wide at maturity making it a large shade tree. It will be the first of the Palo Verdes to bloom. It has become a favorite tree for street side plantings and public areas in Phoenix and Tucson.

The Foothills Palo Verde is also known as Little Leaf Palo Verde. It is a shrubbier, slower growing tree. It will reach about 20 feet tall. The blossoms are a paler yellow with a delicate fragrance. Each branch ends in a thorn, making it undesirable for planting close to walkways.

The Sonoran Palo Verde is also called Palo Brea. This tree has smooth, blue-green bark that looks like a leotard clinging to the branches. This tree is more sculptural looking. It has fewer lower branches and at 35 feet, is a taller tree. It is an ideal tree for a focal point in a larger yard.

The Mexican Palo Verde has a rapid growth rate and unlike its cousins, has a midrib that looks like a long pine needle. The leaves attach to this but are only seen for a short period of time. This tree will be up to 30 feet tall. It can reseed itself easily and seedlings can become a problem. It has been suggested that this Palo Verde should not be planted close to natural preserves and waterways due to its rampant ability to proliferate.

The new kid on the block is a naturally occurring three-way hybrid between the Blue Palo Verde, the Foothills Palo Verde and the Mexican Palo Verde. Because it was found and worked on by researchers at the Arizona Sonoran Desert Museum, it is called the Desert Museum Palo Verde. This tree has all the good characteristics of each of its parents. These include rapid growth, strong upright branching structure, large showy yellow flowers that bloom over a long period of time and disease and pest resistance. In addition, it has no spines, few pods and very little litter.



Palo Verde Blossoms

This is the tree that has been planted along downtown McCullough Boulevard. Other named hybrids are also becoming available from other growers. Look to the nursery for growth characteristics and availability.

The Palo Verde can be used in many settings in the landscape. It is perfectly at home in any kind of naturalistic setting. However the beauty of the tree and its magnificent spring time bloom display make it attractive for any setting. While it will survive on no water it can also be planted near areas that get a lot of water such as a lawn or planting bed. Like all trees, be careful about planting too close to your septic system, power lines or foundations.

As a native tree the Palo Verde will provide food and homes for our native wildlife. Hummingbirds love to nest in the tree and raise their young. I have a Palo Verde in the front and backyards of my home and for many years each has provided a home for a local hummingbird family. Mourning doves and White wing doves will also nest in Palo Verdes, as well as many other species of birds. The pods are devoured by small animals, rabbits munch on fallen litter and quail will roost in them at night. Every living thing including people will appreciate the shade provided in the summer.

When considering a new tree for your landscape, think about the non-fussy, water-thrifty, Palo Verde.

*Laura Murphy is a Lake Havasu City Master Gardener. For more information, contact the Lake Havasu City Master Gardeners by calling their Hot Line at 505-4105. Master Gardeners are also available to answer you question on the first Tuesday of every month at the Library from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.*

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