

INVASIVE PLANTS: LEAD TREE

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Even as a native Phoenician, I was not familiar with lead tree (*Leucaena leucocephala*) until fairly recently. Upon moving into the Coronado Historic District near downtown Phoenix, we were introduced right away as my neighbors on each side have full size lead trees, and many seeds have been shared during wind events.

Lead tree, a member of the Fabaceae (legume) family, has gained a strong foothold in Phoenix and surrounding communities. I've seen it as far east as the Town of Superior, and in the Rio Salado Habitat Restoration Area of the Salt River. Native to southern Mexico and into tropical Central America, lead tree is a fast-growing woody plant with alternate, bipinnate leaves (Photo 1).

Flowers are white or yellow, and produced during the spring months. Fruits are long seedpods around 6 inches long, supporting a dozen or more brown seeds (Photo 2). Seedpods often mature in June, just in time for the arrival of monsoon rains.

An online search of EDDMapS shows lead tree reported in California, Arizona, Texas and Florida. Lead tree can certainly be considered an invasive weed; it forms dense thickets if left unchecked and is a very prolific seed producer. It is also highly tolerant of heat, drought, and poor soil conditions. From vacant lots to wet riparian zones in the desert, lead tree has got it covered! It's important to identify and remove this plant and before it becomes established. As far as control methods go, removing lead tree at the seedling stage is your best bet. Once they pass that stage it's time to reach for your shovel to remove the taproot.



Photo 1. Seedling up close, note the bipinnate leaf.



Photo 2. Lead tree seedpods.
Photo credit: Arizona State University.

In my own yard, I have been impressed with how easily lead tree propagates from seed. My neighbors' trees provide no shortage of seeds that have germinated with the summer rain (Photo 3). Mature lead trees do provide shade, a vital resource in the Phoenix area, but they tend to be brittle with weak wood. Mesquite is definitely a better choice as a native desert shade tree, as is our state tree, the Palo Verde.



Photo 3. Seedlings post-monsoon season. The best time to remove them is shortly after their arrival when they are small and soil is still moist from rainfall.