

Black Locust

(*Robinia pseudoacacia*)

By Fred Nation, Educator, Baldwin County

Black locust is a medium-sized deciduous tree, often to about 40 feet in height, typically with an irregular, open crown, and a short, forked or twisted bole.

Rarely it can attain about 100 feet, with a trunk diameter of 3 feet. The leaves are alternate, odd pinnately compound, with 7 to 21 oval leaflets to about 2 inches long. The leaflets fold together at night and in the daytime during stormy weather. The bark is gray and somewhat scaly, becoming nearly black and deeply furrowed in older trees. Twigs are stout, zigzag, with sharp paired spines at each node. Flowers are white, "pea-shaped," in fragrant, drooping racemes 4 or 5 inches long, in May or June. Fruits are flat pods (legumes) about 4 inches long, with hard bean-like seeds that are reported to be poisonous. The attractive flower clusters and feathery compound leaves of *Robinia* share a distinct family resemblance to white forms of *Wisteria*, which, like black locust, are in the pea family.

The original range is somewhat uncertain, but black locust appears to be native to the Appalachian highlands, from Pennsylvania to northeastern Alabama, with a separate indigenous area in the Ozark plateau of Missouri and Arkansas. Since colonial times black locust has been widely planted, and it has often escaped cultivation. Today it has natural-



Photo by Fred Nation

ized from Maine to California, and throughout Alabama. It is very fast growing, and it spreads aggressively by means of root sprouts. Dense colonial thickets are often seen in disturbed sites, such as abandoned fields, spoil sites, burned-over areas, and clear-cuts. Like other members of the pea family, black locust is a nitrogen fixer, a characteristic that has made it useful for erosion control, to stabilize poor soils in hilly or mountainous areas.

The heartwood is hard, heavy, and very resistant to decay. The colonists at Jamestown, Virginia discovered black locust trees. They soon learned, perhaps

from the local Indians, of its durability, because it was selected for the corner posts in their first homes in 1607. The Virginia Indians used black locust for their bows, and they may have planted it along the Atlantic coast. Since those early days, it has been used for fence posts, railroad ties and trestles, and for boat construction. The wood has one of the lowest shrinkage values of any American tree. This makes it especially useful for wagon wheels and hubs, shoe lasts, construction dowels, and an historic use that a few of us can still remember: support pins for the glass insulators on utility poles.

Black locust trees are usually short-lived, due at least in part to infestations by locust borers which mine through the twigs and branches, weakening them and eventually causing them to die before they become large trees suitable for lumber. Because of its short lifespan and weedy habits, black locust is seldom used as an ornamental. But in the right setting, with proper care, our historic native black locust tree could be an interesting and beautiful addition to a naturalized landscape.

The Alabama State Champion *Robinia pseudoacacia*, in Madison County, is 91.3 inches in circumference, 105 feet tall, with an average crownspread of 37.1 feet. 🌳



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