

Plumbago auriculata



Where do we find it?

I seem to see it in the most abjectly neglected places: underfunded public schools, freeway onramps, and vacant lots.

Why?!

It's so hardy, drought tolerant and vigorous that it's often the only remaining plant surviving on eroding hillsides, abandoned lots, and under-maintained public lands.



It is actually a beautiful, versatile plant.



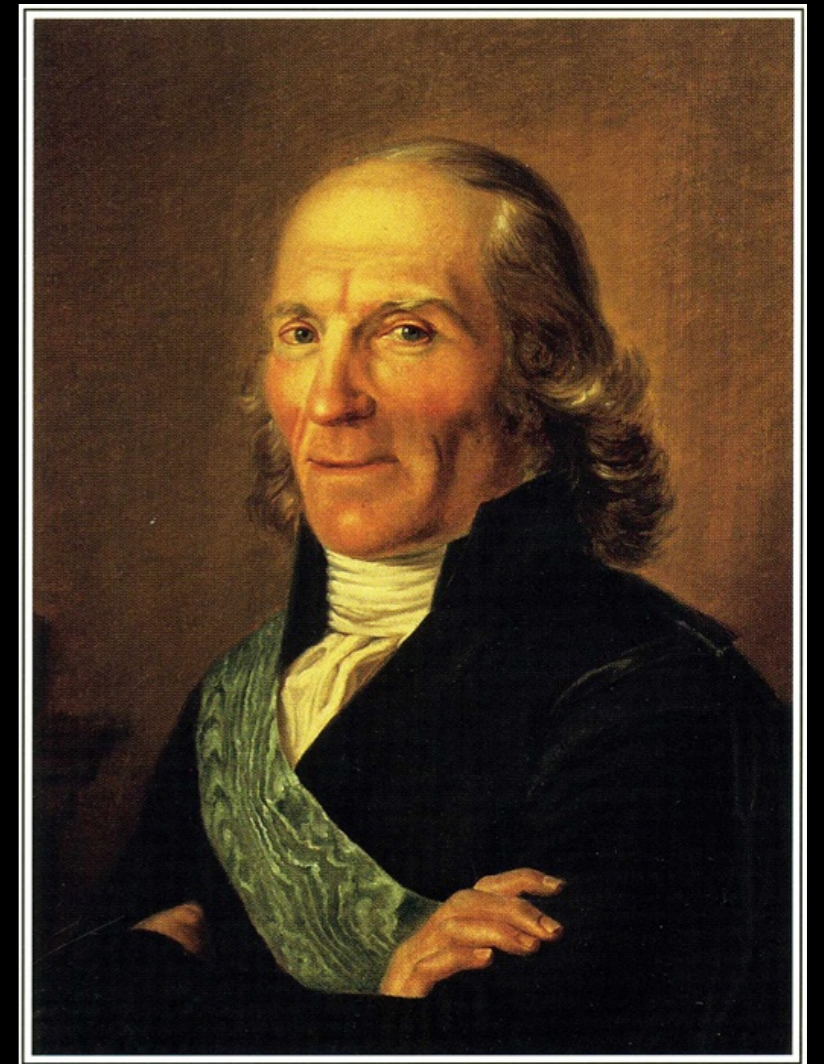
- Foundation plant in maintained gardens
- Tall, bright green hedge dividing properties
- Climber up a trellis
- Gorgeous cascades of flowers on sloping hills

Family: Plumbaginaceae

Genus: *Plumbago* (plum-BAY-go)

Species: *auriculata* (ah-rick-yoo-LAH-tuh)

- *Plumbago auriculata* syn. *P. capensis*
- Native to South Africa, named *capensis* after the Cape region from which it came by Thunberg, "Father of South African Botany" in 1794
- Too late! Already named *auriculata* by Jean Baptiste Lamarck in 1786, in the East Indies, where it had been taken via trade routes as a garden plant.



What's in the name?



- Plumbago comes from the word plumbum, meaning lead (remember, lead's elemental symbol is Pb?)
- It was thought to be a treatment for lead poisoning





Auriculata means "having ears", named after the ear shaped leaf base



Common names

- Cape Leadwort
- Cape Plumbago
- Skyflower
- Zulu: umasheleshele

Medicinal and traditional uses

Lead poisoning

Treat warts

Broken bones

Wounds

Snuff for headaches

Emetic to dispel bad
dreams

A stick placed in the
thatch of huts will ward
off lightning



Growth habit

- Evergreen perennial
- As a shrub grows to 6-8 feet tall and 8-12 feet wide
- Naturally cascading mound shape if left unpruned
- Very vigorous growth rate
- Sends out semi woody whip-like branches, contributing to its loose shape



Can be grown in pots or trained up support as
a vine almost 20 feet





Pruned into a flowering hedge

Pruning

- Very vigorous growth
- Prune after a growth flush (winter) once it has finished blooming to encourage new growth
- Flowers appear only on new wood
- Hard pruning will keep it bushy and maximize flowers
- Tip: use long shears to keep a small distance from the plant, to avoid getting tangled up in the sticky flowers



Pruning
can either make your Cape
Plumbago look like this:



Or this:



- Oblong leaves, 1-2 inches long
- First light green, growing darker green with maturity
- Leaves appear alternately
- Blooms profusely on new wood with rich blue, pale blue, or white five petaled flowers held in multiple clusters at the branch tips



- The best way to predict the color is to buy cutting-grown selections:

"Blue Cape"

"Imperial Blue"

"Alba" (white)

Alba is said to glow in the evening light, so it is well suited for gardeners who enjoy their gardens in the evenings



- Perfect flowers have five petals, with the bases of these petals fused together into a long tube, but with the five petal tips separate
- *The flower shape and color make it especially attractive to butterflies*



Habitat for nature

- It is a host plant for the larval stage of several butterflies
- A nectar source for several other species of butterfly
- Bees are drawn to it
- Birds who prefer the cover of thick vegetation are drawn to it







- Very hardy, vigorous plant, which seems to thrive in situations of neglect and drought
- Does well in both sun, part shade and shade (flowers less in shade)
- Thrives across California, from the coast into the inland valleys, where, in the Central Valley, homeowners say the frost helps to keep its growth in check
- Prefers slightly acidic, well draining soil, but will do well pretty much anywhere you plonk it, survives in a range of pH and soil types
- Susceptible to root rot, so don't overwater, especially in heavy clay soil
- Gardeners claim this plant thrives in situations of abject neglect, but can suffer from manganese deficiency, which presents with yellow foliage and can be corrected with specific fertilizing
- Deer resistant

Why I'll never plant this in my garden:

- Vigorous nature and ability to spread via runners underground
- Can become a weed, choking out surrounding plants unless pruned regularly
- It has tiny, sticky gland-tipped hairs on the sepal at the base of the flowers
- The beautiful and numerous flowers can become a nuisance, attaching to all (people, pets) who pass by
- Pruning is further complicated by these sticky sepals



Why we like it

- A drought tolerant, vigorous plant
- Great for sloped landscapes otherwise suffering from erosion
- Adaptable to both coastal areas and a range of soil types
- Profuse bloomer attracting birds, bees, and butterflies
- Creates a beautiful color wave in a low water landscape

