

Leucaena

A genus of about 50 species, mostly from warm temperate and tropical zones of North America and extending to Peru. Named from the Greek *leucos* (white) in reference to the flower color.

Leucaena esculenta

Guaje

Native to mountainous areas of central Mexico.

Habit A deciduous tree; to 30 feet tall.

Inflorescence Axillary, long-branched racemes, to 12 inches long; flowers white, to $\frac{1}{4}$ inch long, clustered in tight heads ($\frac{3}{4}$ – $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches across) on the raceme. Flowers February to March.

Fruit Pod flat, purplish, 6–9 x $\frac{3}{4}$ – $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches, containing 10–25 seeds.

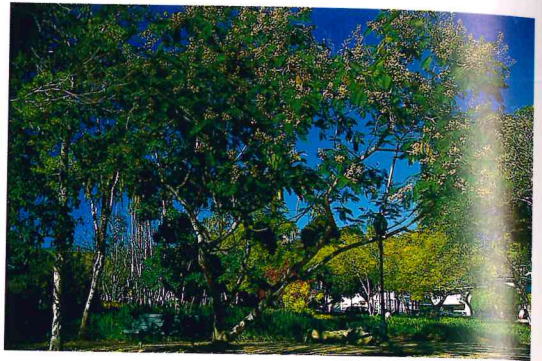
Twigs Strongly angled, almost winged, glabrous, greenish-brown, with numerous vertical lenticels.

Bark Smooth, light gray, becoming cracked into rectangular flakes at the base of larger trees.

Leaves Alternate, bipinnately compound, 6–16 inches long; pinnae 20–60 pairs, each with 40–80 pairs of leaflets; leaflets linear, $\frac{1}{8}$ – $\frac{1}{4}$ x $\frac{1}{20}$ inch; rachis bearing large red nectariferous glands near the base and between pairs of upper pinnae.

Notes The original specimen from which this species was described was a painting made by artists with the Sesse and Mocino expedition to Mexico (1787 to 1803). During the early period of exploration of Mexico and the southwestern United States, new species were often “collected” by painting them in their native habitat, showing as many features as possible. Unripened seeds of this species are commonly used as spices in Mexico and fill the markets of Guadalajara in the winter months. However, in other species of this genus, the toxic compound mimosine leads to loss of hair and infertility. Until recently, *L. esculenta* was only found in yards in the lower East Side and lower West Side of Santa Barbara and was likely introduced by Latino immigrants. This and other species of the genus have been actively promoted for reforestation in tropical and subtropical regions because of their nitrogen-fixing and “green manure” potential. The species name *esculenta* means good to eat.

Locations One tree in Alice Keck Park



Top: Open crown of *Leucaena esculenta*.
Bottom: Delicate bipinnately compound leaves and flower heads.