



Bulnesia arborea canopy, 40- 50 ft? note royal palm in background. [photo from <http://bio.fiu.edu/trees>]. Right: Close up showing fruit(samara) and large flower, almost 3 inches across, on trees at Naples Botanical Gardens on June 12, 2008.

Verawood - *Bulnesia arborea*

Doug Caldwell

Bulnesia arborea, aka, verawood, is in the same family, Zygophyllaceae, as lignum vitae (*Guaiaecum sanctum*). Now, if you are still with me, here comes the fun stuff. Verawood is native to coastal forests of Venezuela and Columbia. David Fairchild was the first to introduce verawood to the United States at the Fairchild Tropical Gardens in Miami. The tree he first saw in a courtyard in Venezuela from a distance reminded Fairchild of a cassia with its pinnate leaves and yellow flowers. The genus name commemorates General D. Manuel Bulnes, a president of Chile in the 19th century. There are several of these trees on the outside perimeter of the Naples Botanical Gardens. Stephen Brown, Lee County Extension Horticulture, is close to completing a book on flowering trees and rates the flower display as “A+” for this tree! In fact I am quoting much of Stephen’s page on vera wood from his upcoming book.

Flowering Month(s): April - October

Leaf Persistence: Evergreen

Zone: 10a – 12b, 30°F minimum ?

Growth Rate: Slow to moderate

Typical Dimension: 30'x40' (100' anomaly?)

Uses: Garden, Park, Shade, Specimen, Streetscape

Nutritional Requirements: Medium

Messiness: Low

Salt Tolerance: High

Drought Tolerance: High

“You’ll be excited by the reoccurring exploding flower bombs of this spectacular bloomer. *B. arborea* blooms 2 to 4 times during the warmest months. The golden yellow flowers are slightly cupped and are reminiscence of spokes in a wagon wheel.” I was impressed with the size of the flowers, much larger than lignum vitae, the individual flower fills the palm of your hand at about 3 inches across. The flowers are durable and will last for 4 days or so floating as decorations in a bowl. The fruit are about 2-3 inches long, consist of 5 broadly winged, one-seeded capsules and as local tree expert and

upcoming author Chuck Ray remarked remind one of the seed pods of our native fishfuddle (*Piscidia piscipula*), aka, Jamaica dogwood.

“Young *B. arborea* are irregular growers and have little inclination to become a single-trunked tree. The young sampling needs staking and training. When grown in the open, and left unpruned, it is a multi-stemmed, domed shaped tree with broad spreading, pendulous branches that sweep the ground. Single-trunked trees, however, are easy to obtain and simple to maintain. With their straight, slender trunks, and smaller crowns they grow vertically faster than their multi-trunk counterparts. Mature single-trunked trees can have boles free of branches for the first 15 to 20 feet. Despite this, their branches may cascade close to the ground, bringing a spectacular flower show to eye level. I’m beginning to see more of *B. arborea* in south Florida parks and streetscapes, probably because of its tolerant of high pH soils. Its wide, dense, round canopy makes it an excellent shade tree, and it responds well to pruning, and should make a fine hedge as well. Flowering begins at an early age. This cold tender tropical should be planted from February through September for faster initial growth. When young, fertilize *B. arborea* twice a year, in February and again in October. This will also accelerate its slow growth. When well established, fertilize it once a year, just before or at the start of the rainy season. Overwatering can cause pale foliage and a washed-out appearance.

Leaves: Even -pinnate, opposite, bright olive green to 5 inches long with 7-14 pairs of leaflets

Flowers: Golden yellow five petals in terminal panicles

Fruit: Samaras, circular in 5 distinct parts

This tree is available from at least a dozen nurseries in the Homestead area. Some of our local suppliers can provide them upon request. The degree of cold hardiness is being evaluated. Although there are some trees that made it through 2008 January’s 29-30 degrees in fine condition in Ft. Myers.

Doug Caldwell, Ph.D. is the Commercial Landscape Horticulture educator with the Cooperative Extension Service, an off-campus branch of the University of Florida, Institute of the Food and Agricultural Sciences and a department of the Public Services Division of Collier County government. E-mail dougbug@ufl.edu. Call 239-353-4244 x203. Extension programs are open to all persons without regard to race, color, creed, sex, handicap or national origin. For updates on the Southwest Florida Horticulture Learning Center and more landscape pest management details, visit <http://collier.ifas.ufl.edu>.