

Sweet acacia

(*Vachellia farnesiana*)

For definitions of botanical terms, visit en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_botanical_terms.

Sweet acacia is an aptly named shrub to small tree with golden, sweet-scented flowers that bloom year-round, peaking in winter. These nectar-rich flowers attract a variety of pollinators, especially butterflies like the Red-banded hairstreak. The plant's dense foliage provides cover for birds and small animals. Few birds eat the pods. Sweet acacia occurs naturally in pinelands, coastal hammocks and shell middens throughout Central and South Florida, with rare populations in three Panhandle counties. In Europe, the plant is cultivated for use in perfumes.

Sweet acacia's bright yellow flowers are born in globose clusters. Leaves are compound and up to 4 inches long. They are alternately arranged. Leaflets are small, numerous and soft, giving the leaf a feather- or fern-like appearance. Branches are low, drooping and zigzag. They and the trunk are armed with many grayish, 1- to 2-inch long spines. Fruits are thick, green cylindrical pods that turn reddish-brown to purplish as they mature. Seeds are brown and shiny.

The genus name *Vachellia* is an homage to 19th century plant collector Rev. George Harvey Vachell.¹ The species epithet *farnesiana* honors Odoardo Farnese (1573–1626), an Italian nobleman who first cultivated the plant. The plant is formerly known as *Acacia farnesiana* and *Mimosa farnesiana*.

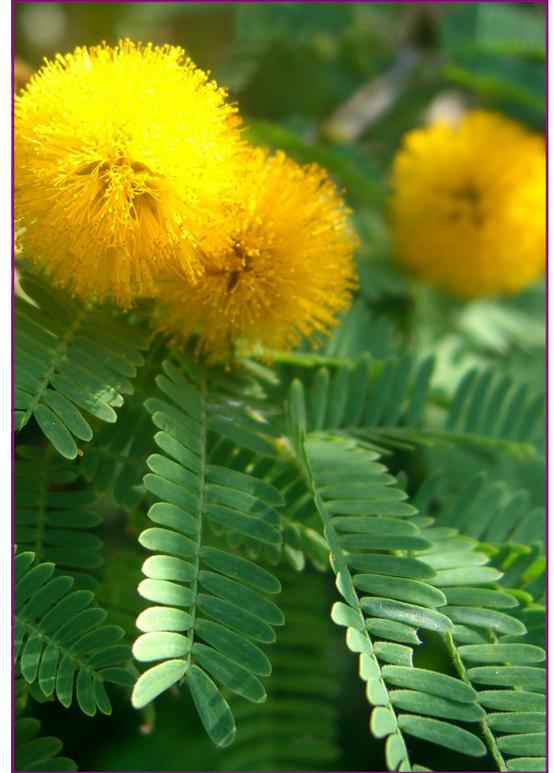


Photo by Jason Hollinger (CC BY 2.0)

Family: Fabaceae (Legume or pea family)

Native range: Marion County south to the Keys; Escambia, Bay and Franklin counties in the Panhandle
To see where natural populations of Sweet acacia have been vouchered, visit www.florida.plantatlas.usf.edu.

Hardiness: Zones 9–11

Lifespan: Perennial

Soil: Dry to moist, well-drained, sandy, loamy or calcareous soils

Exposure: Full sun

Growth habit: 8–15'+ tall with 5–10'+ spread

Propagation: Cuttings, seed

Garden tips: Sweet acacia's showy, fragrant flowers, fern-like foliage and spiny serpentine branches add interest to the landscape. It is a fast-growing shrub to small tree that works well as single specimen or planted in a group to form a hedge or buffer. Once established, it requires little maintenance. The plant is salt and drought tolerant, but can handle some moisture, although too much may result in root rot. Sweet acacia is generally evergreen but may be deciduous in its northern range.

Plants are available from nurseries that specialize in Florida native plants. Visit www.PlantRealFlorida.org to find a nursery in your area.

1. <http://pza.sanbi.org/vachellia-kosiensis>