



# Leucaena or Cow bush

## Taxonomy

Order: Fabales

Family: Fabaceae

Species: *Leucaena leucocephala* (Lam.) de Wit

Synonyms: *Acacia leucocephala*, *Mimosa leucocephala*

## Summary

A small fast-growing mimosoid tree native to southern Mexico and Central America; now naturalized throughout the tropics. It has the potential to become an environmental weed that threatens native biodiversity. It has many common names which vary between geographical region.



Leucaena tree © Roger & Alison Heath

## Biology

Commonly found in riparian zones (banks of watercourses) and roadsides in tropical and subtropical regions. It is also found in open woodlands, gardens, parks, waste areas, disturbed sites and on coastal foreshores and offshore islands. It is a prolific seed producer the seeds are often dispersed by small animals and cattle. The pods may be spread short distances by wind and can float on water. The plant resprouts after its stems are cut or damaged making it difficult to manage.

## Distribution in Caribbean

Common throughout the Caribbean region, including Anguilla and TCI in disturbed and natural habitats.

## Pathway of Entry

Natural dispersal: animals, wind and water

Intentional dispersal: it was widely cultivated, mostly in farming situations, for animal feed, firewood, poles, medicine, shade, soil conservation and improvement, tannin, dye, a windbreak, a garden ornamental and as an urban shade tree.

## Impact

Leucaena grows very fast in suitable sites; forming dense, homogenous thickets that are difficult to control once established. Invaded areas become unusable and inaccessible with most other vegetation replaced. It has the potential to be a serious environmental weed and a threat to native biodiversity.



## Further Information:

- <https://www.cabi.org/isc/datasheet/31634>
- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leucaena\\_leucocephala](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leucaena_leucocephala)
- [http://www.tropicalforages.info/key/Forages/Media/Html/Leucaena\\_leucocephala.htm](http://www.tropicalforages.info/key/Forages/Media/Html/Leucaena_leucocephala.htm)



*Leucaena leucocephala* flowers © Scott Bauer



*Leucaena leucocephala* foliage © Forest & Kim Starr



*Leucaena leucocephala* fruits and seeds © Roger Culos



*Leucaena leucocephala* ripening pods © Col Middleton  
DPI&F

### Field Description

*Leucaena* is a shrub or small tree usually growing 2-10 m tall, but occasionally reaching 15 m or more. The younger stems are green and usually densely covered in fine greyish coloured hairs. Older stems have a relatively smooth, greyish or greyish-brown, bark with numerous small raised spots. The leaves (up to 35 cm long) are twice-compound (bipinnate) and have 3-10 pairs of branchlets. They are alternately arranged along the stems and borne on stalks 2-5 cm long. A small raised gland is usually present on the petiole, or just below where the lowest pair of branchlets meet. Branchlets are 2-10 cm long and each bears 5-22 pairs of leaflets. These leaflets (7-21 mm long and 1.5-5 mm wide) are elongated in shape with pointed tips; and are either hairless or have hairy margins. The flowers are borne in dense globular clusters (12-30 mm across), which look like a 'pompom' when the flowers open.

The flower clusters are borne in the leaf forks on stalks 2-6 cm long, with one to three clusters present in each leaf fork. Each of the small flowers has five tiny sepals (2-2.5 mm long), five small greenish-white coloured petals (2-4 mm long), and ten prominent pale yellow or whitish coloured stamens (6-10 mm long).

The fruit are elongated, flattened, pods with a pointed tip. These pods (8-22.5 cm long and 10-20 mm wide) are initially green in colour but turn brown or reddish-brown as they mature. Each of these pods contains 10-25 hard seeds (6-10 mm long and 3-6 mm wide) that are glossy brown, flattened, and somewhat oval in shape.

### Similar Species

There are several mimosoid trees found in the Caribbean region that are similar in appearance but the description above and invasive nature should be sufficient to distinguish *L. leucocephala*.